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The Matrix in Theory

Myriam Diocaretz and Stefan Herbrechter (Eds)

The *Matrix* in Theory

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The *Matrix* in Theory

Edited by

Myriam Diocaretz and
Stefan Herbrechter

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction
Stefan Herbrechter *7*

Section One: Cultural Phenomenon *25*

"So Tonight I'm Gonna Party Like It's 1999": Looking Forward to *The Matrix*
Jon Stratton *27*

Revolution in *The Matrix*: A Cue Call for Reflexive Sociology
Kimberly Barton *53*

Enter the Matrix: Interactivity and the Logic of Digital Capitalism
Christian Krug and Joachim Frenk *73*

Section Two: Virtualities *95*

Philosophy and *The Matrix*
Chris Falzon *97*

Simulacra, Simulation and *The Matrix*
Sven Lutzka *113*

Is There an Exit from "Virtual Reality?" Grid and Network – From *Tron* to *The Matrix*
Elie During *131*

Section Three: Embodiment *151*

Technofantasies and Embodiment
Don Ihde *153*

Queering *The Matrix*: Hacking the Digital Divide and Slashing into the Future
Aimee Bahng *167*

Sexing *The Matrix*: Gender and Sexuality in/as Cyberfiction
Rainer Emig *193*

Section Four: Theory *209*

Matrix – The New Constitution Between Hardware, Software and Wetware
Denisa Kera *211*

The *Matrix* Trilogy and the Triumph of Virtual Reason – Territorialized Topoi, Nomadic Lines
Salah el Moncef bin Khalifa *227*

The Posthuman Subject in *The Matrix*
Stefan Herbrechter *249*

"New Theory?" The Posthumanist Academy and the Beguilements of the *Matrix* Trilogy
Ivan Callus *291*

Contributors *311*

INTRODUCTION
THEORY IN THE MATRIX

STEFAN HERBRECHTER

The *Matrix* trilogy continues to split opinions widely, polarising the downright dismissive and the wildly enthusiastic. This includes reactions within academic circles and from film and cultural critics who have been all too eager to pronounce themselves on all kinds of issues relating to the *Matrix*.[1] Significantly, some kind of uneasiness quickly surfaces in most contributions to the debate. For some it may still be a question of "serious" academics having to be apologetic about delving into "low" popular culture and indulging in some form of compromising but ultimately "immature" and therefore embarrassing "pleasure." For others it might just be even more evidence of (cultural) theory's or cultural studies' weakness to take blockbuster culture – produced for quick consumption and short-term profit – too seriously. How can "serious" thinkers, even philosophers, sink so low as to find their inspiration in facile, superficial and largely incoherent, eclectic mass media franchises? Who forces them to be "cool" or even speak "cool" to get their message across to a seemingly ever more disenchanted, disconnected, radically hedonistic, intellectually ill-prepared generation of students? Is it the market? The Matrix itself? The university in ruins? Should one not rather resist or even try and reverse the trend by deliberately ignoring "populist" culture and instead return to the more "serious" stuff'? Is theory or cultural studies, in allying itself to, and in reading "culture" as a mere "way of life," not becoming part of the problem it nevertheless seeks to describe, comment upon, analyse and even criticise? In short, is theory today (in) the Matrix? Is the increasing desire for "post-theory," for leaving the theory, culture, science etc. wars legacies behind, not a sign that people in English and other "serious" departments are wishing for a Morpheus to turn up and offer them the red pill? Others who are not so ready to let theory slip might

[1] A little note on usage: we have tried to be as consistent as possible throughout the volume in differentiating between *The Matrix* (the first film of the trilogy), *Matrix* (everything that refers to the Wachowski "brand," e.g. the *Matrix* franchise, the *Matrix* trilogy, etc.), Matrix (the "programme," SF "concept" or "topos") and matrix (general usage, as in "biological matrix," or Judith Butler's "heterosexual matrix").

instead be waiting for some kind of theoretical Neo to lead them in the fight against the machines. Captured in the virtual reality of theorese some may be looking for a Neo to unplug them from postmodernism, poststructuralism, postfeminism, postcolonialism, postmarxism, and, most recently, posthumanism.

The present volume is unashamedly but not dogmatically theoretical even though there is not much agreement about what kind of theory is best suited to confront "post-theoretical" times. But it is probably fair to say that there is agreement about one thing, namely that if theory appears to be "like" the Matrix today it does so because the culture around it and which "made" it itself seems to be captured in some kind of Matrix. The only way out of this is through more and renewed, refreshed theorising, not less. Therefore it seems interesting in itself to point out that in addition to its unprecedented success as film, video, computer game, franchise, etc. the *Matrix* has been fully embraced as a rich source of theoretical and cultural references. There have been far too many interventions in journals, at conferences, on the internet to be listed here. Some of the most influential references can be found in the bibliography at the end of this introduction. The main predecessors to this volume on the *Matrix* are also listed there (Irwin 2002; Badiou et al. 2003; Haber 2003; Yeffeth 2003; Clover 2004; Kapell & Doty 2004; Irwin 2005).

The *Matrix*, and thus writing about the *Matrix*, has by now gained some canonicity in curricula at various levels. There is what could be called a "*Matrix* phenomenon" (some might even go as far as to speak of a whole "*Matrix* generation") which has not failed to attract analytical interest from all corners. This volume probes the effects the *Matrix* trilogy continues to provoke and evaluates how or to what extent they coincide with certain developments within theory. Is the enthusiastic philosophising and theorising spurned by the *Matrix* a sign of the desperate state cultural theory is in, in the sense of "see how low theory has sunk"? Or could the *Matrix* be one of the "master texts" for something like a renewal, the sign of "New Cultural Theory," understood as an engagement with "new cultural and theoretical debates over technology" (Armitage 1999) and as being mainly concerned with new and changing relations between science, technology, culture, art, politics, ethics and the media? Several essays in this volume evaluate this possibility, notably in the ones in the last section.

There is thus first the question of the relationship between the *Matrix* and theory which guides this volume, and in particular the use of theory (i.e. concepts usually associated with philosophy, cultural theory, theology, etc.) in the films. Can one still speak of simply "applying" theory to a film that itself engages with theoretical, philosophical, theological and other issues,

and which could instead be thought of as a theory-film or a film "about" theory? Is it because the sinister, deeply metaphysical scenario and the "concept" of the Matrix itself strike a fundamental chord in these "postmodern," "posthumanist," and "post-theoretical" times? Or maybe is it because theory itself – in its institutionalised and orthodox form – is now being experienced as some kind of Matrix, namely as a discourse or jargon that critical readers feel incapable of finding an exit from that would open out onto the "real" (the real world, the real problems, or theory's own suppressed "real," its history, exclusions, unacknowledged translations etc.)? It is difficult to envisage how theory could be escaped or left behind ("posted") without replacing it by something very much resembling theory. "After theory" would inevitably involve some Morpheus-like move that says: "unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You can only see it for yourself." At the same time it is of course also emblematic for the kind of "liberal humanism" underlying this idea of "free choice" which theory has always attacked and based its critical self-justification on. The moment you are offered a red or a blue pill there is no choice, only a decision (not a "decision in the strong sense" which, as Derrida would say, must be an unconditional one). Not to choose would confirm the status quo (choosing the blue pill is therefore an option but not really a choice); choosing the red pill is a decision but, in the absence of a radical and unknown alternative, not an unconditional or "radical" one.

So if the *Matrix* is, amongst many other things, an allegory of theory, then a "good reading" (or serious textual criticism) of the film must be a case of "theory striking back." It is a reminder of what theory was articulated or invented for in the first place: to counter, for example, "moral criticism" of the Leavisite kind: theory is not interested whether seeing the *Matrix* turns you into a better or worse person. Theory is not "therapeutic" or "cathartic" in this sense, it is not encouraging you to join another self-help group. It may be worth reminding that increasing the visibility of theory was a reaction against certain "fallacies," e.g. the "intentional fallacy." Not that it is immaterial what the Wachowski brothers have to say about their intentions and their techniques, but a text develops its own life and dynamic. Or take the "affective fallacy." Not that the impression a text makes is not important, but criticism should not aim to take the place of behavioural psychology. "Subjective" responses need to be seen as extensions of the text itself.

If the *Matrix* presents theory with its own post-theoretical image, it makes a theoretical engagement with it at once absolutely desirable and very tricky. An adequate response to the *Matrix* involves theory dealing critically with its own cultural "emanations," with generation, canonisation and renewal, while at the same time dealing with some of its own "repressed,"

i.e. the return of some of theory's spectres like technological determinism, humanism, the question of gender, sexual and racial difference, the role of capitalism and science and the role of culture itself. This volume is not concerned with giving preference either to the *Matrix* or to theory; it does not use the *Matrix* to illustrate theoretical, philosophical, theological and other concepts. It also does not simply "apply" theory to a powerful narrative, genre, film etc. Neither does it claim any precedence for the *Matrix* as such, although one cannot escape the fact that the *Matrix* probably deliberately "uses" or even teases theory. Certain well-established postmodern topoi and ideas are cited in typically postmodern, "pastiche-like" aesthetic practice. It is not a question of theory finding itself in the *Matrix*, nor the *Matrix* "being" theoretical. What is most often forgotten in the many attempts to hijack the *Matrix* for educational purposes (whether it is simple life-coaching, philosophy, theology, literature, film studies etc.) is that the *Matrix* is first and foremost a (filmic) text and a powerful piece of (science) fiction. First of all it therefore needs to be "read" on its own terms. It provides the stimulus, the input of the discussion and in order to do it justice, a reading needs to meet it on its own, textual, terrain. This is what theory has always been about – delete the "literary" from "literary theory" and place it alongside its practical complement, namely "criticism" – a theoretically informed practical reading of a text and its "effects," its (wider cultural, historical, aesthetic etc.) context, its saids and unsaids, its presences, absences, gaps, desires, implied readers, narratives (and other technical) devices etc.

Only through a careful reading of the films can the main theoretical "issues" portrayed in the film be further discussed, like the ontological status of virtuality, the question of cyberspace and embodiment, the role of race, gender, ethnicity, class etc. in posthuman subjectivities and identity formation (and the ethical and moral problems related to posthuman forms of desire and repression, the "technological" unconscious and the future of psychoanalysis); or political issues related to revolutionary action (the possibility of change, new forms of alienation and community, the role of aesthetics and the future of Marxism); or philosophico-theological aspects concerning messianism, apocalyptism, the role of utopia, the future of democracy under the conditions of virtuality; or even socio-theoretical engagements with the representation of the future of multiculturalism, the city, technoculture, etc. All of these questions have by now a firm place and are almost de rigueur in contemporary critical and theoretical engagements in (comparative) literature, cultural studies and media departments – and texts like the *Matrix* are most welcome to continue the dialogue between cultural criticism and popular culture. The fact that the contributors of this volume interpret these issues in very different ways should be taken as a sign that this

dialogue is far from being "established" or indeed based on any kind of premeditated consensus.

In this vein, the contributions in Section Two of this volume ("Virtualities") constitute a critical reevaluation of various forms in which the *Matrix* has been appropriated (for mainly didactic and illustrative reasons) to help readers re-engage with the philosophical problems the films seem to "quote" (like "Plato's Cave," Descartes' "Evil Demon," etc.) and which have become reference points or even topoi in contemporary theory and wider "posthumanist" circles. Chris Falzon expands on this philosophical aspect of the *Matrix*, carrying on from his *Philosophy Goes to the Movies* (2002: 19-48). The relation between philosophy and the *Matrix* is here understood through "mutuality:"

> *The Matrix* both alludes to the philosophical problem of scepticism about the external world, and makes its viewers confront the question. At the same time this engagement with philosophical themes opens up the film to a further level of interaction with philosophy, because it becomes possible for this engagement to be criticised, for the film to be subjected to philosophical criticism.

In a similar but even more vigorous tone, Elie During makes his claims – first published in *Matrix – machine philosophique* (2003; co-edited by During, with contributions by Alain Badiou and others) – accessible to an English-speaking audience. During's approach is that the *Matrix* is a philosophical "machine" in a Deleuzian sense, which in its visual and textual combinatory plays through the possibilities of the virtual. The main idea of the film is in fact not to reject the virtual as a lesser form of the real – a facile opposition wrongly but frequently set up – but to make the Matrix "palatable" for human experience: "What distinguishes a film like *The Matrix* from other films that deal with the same topic is that it makes one see how the real and the virtual are set out *in practice*, not in the terms of an imaginary topology where reality and simulation are always conceptualised, whether intended or not, as two distinct but adjacent 'worlds,'" During explains. In order to illustrate his rather provocative approach, he focuses on the role of the telephone in the *Matrix*, as well as the "bullet-time" technology used by the Wachowski brothers, and opposes the idea of virtuality achieved here with an earlier attempt in *Tron* (1982).

To bring the discussion back to the question of theory: despite the rapprochement between philosophy, theory and the *Matrix* in these contributions, it would nevertheless be naïve to think that there is a simple parallelism, mere coincidence or a "shared interest" between the *Matrix* science fiction and current developments in theory. It would be naïve for two

reasons: it would mean to ignore that cultural theory has come under siege and is in serious trouble. This does not mean that an end to the practice of "theorising" – something that would literally be unthinkable – is in sight, as many of theory's enemies are all to eager to announce, but it does mean that the specific body of theoretical texts that has been growing ever since the 1960s and 70s, which transformed the humanities beyond recognition and created an unprecedented interdisciplinary arena grouped around notions like culture, text and more recently, technology, is under attack from all corners, left, right and centre, and in serious crisis. Recent works by Cunningham (2002), Eagleton (2003) and Patai & Corral (2005) and many others before them are only the tip of the iceberg. The increasing number of references to "post-theory" are a sure sign that theory's "archives" are being opened up for scrutiny, reinterpretation and rewriting. This is to a certain extent a welcome development because it will ensure the renewal of critical engagement at once with the critical practice of theorising and the necessary adaptation of theory to new political and cultural circumstances (in terms of the history of technology, the challenges of "posthumanism," the future of globalisation, questions of environmentalism, religious fundamentalism, terrorism etc.). The *Matrix* however engages with theory in its current state of dissolution. It returns to theory an image of itself that is not only simplified but also nostalgic. This is most obvious in the use of Baudrillard. In this volume, Sven Lutzka provides a good summary and critique in this respect.

The "appropriation" of Baudrillard by *The Matrix* certainly is not without irony but, of course, as Baudrillard was quick to point out himself, in the long list of films and other texts that deal with the impossibility to distinguish between real and virtual, the *Matrix* merely constitutes something like a "paroxystic synthesis." But by trying to make this dilemma "transparent" the films actually contribute to the process rather than either effectively criticise or even resist it. "*The Matrix* is like the film about the Matrix that the Matrix would have produced" (Baudrillard 2003: 127). *The Matrix* is thus part of the "problem" it seems to describe, rather than its solution. But is the same true for theory? Baudrillard famously demanded that theory drop its fundamentally "realist" legitimation of truth in a time of a "disappearing" world and instead embrace the idea of using "fatal strategies" like "seduction" and seeing itself as "theory-event," as its own performance:

> Let's be like the Stoics: if the world is fatal, let's be more fatal than the world. If it is indifferent, let's be even more indifferent. One has to defeat the world and seduce it by an indifference that is at least equal to its own. (Baudrillard 1987: 86).

Theory has problems with products of mass culture that throw reflections of theory or critical thought and philosophy back at it because its own critical reflexes become invalidated by this. It puts the question of the place and use of the critic back on the table. It confronts, à la Baudrillard, theory with its own simulation. What is the specific "fatal strategy" for theory in this situation? It rearticulates the question of theory's "identity": what is it, and who and what is it for? Neither commentary nor illustration, neither morally didactic nor purely aesthetic, etc. In the case of the *Matrix*, theory no longer occurs *après coup*, but in the true nature of the "post" it occurs at once too late and too soon. Theory is forced to do its own anamnesis. But maybe theory, *n'en déplaise à Baudrillard*, does not have to go to these metaphysical extremes. Theorising the *Matrix* may first of all demonstrate that there is a huge difference between any critique of the "system" and systematic critique.

However, it would also be naïve to overemphasize any idea of reflection between the *Matrix* and theory for another reason. It would actually be neglecting to *read* the *Matrix* theoretically. As long as there is a serious and systematic and analytical engagement with the *Matrix* as a filmic text that comes along with a context in which it also intervenes (see the contributions grouped in the section the *Matrix* as "Cultural Phenomenon"), there will be a need for a theory and theoretical concepts applicable to and adapted for the occasion. The *Matrix* phenomenon, i.e. the whole aspect of reception, the hugely important marketing campaign before, during and after, the numerous accessories, the games, the websites, the entirety of genres serving as source and spin offs to the film, the entire aspect of cultural fashion and transformation that might have engendered a "*Matrix* generation," maybe even the beginning of a new "cosmology," need to be *read*, that is analysed, critically reflected upon, theorised. And since theory is part of the baggage the films bring along, this means theory critically reflecting upon itself (which is one possible understanding of the term "post-theory").

In this sense, the *Matrix* phenomenon is also a (cultural, historical, psychological, material…) "symptom." The essays in the first section of this volume explore precisely this aspect. Jon Stratton undertakes the invaluable task of anchoring the *Matrix* trilogy within its cultural historical context ("From Y2K to Post 9/11," as he puts it). One of the striking aspects about the reception of the trilogy is in fact, after all the excitement about the scenario set up in *The Matrix*, the huge disenchantment with sequels one and two, *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*. On the one hand, there is of course an intrinsic inevitability about this disappointment. The contemporary cultural obsession with sequelisation is buying into audience expectation, desire and

its partial fulfilment and deferral, but all too often this is too visibly commercially driven. As Stratton also argues, the narrative logic of the sequelised story is often overtaken by external cultural and historical developments (cf. Budra & Schellenberg 1998). This might explain why ideologically the sequels of the trilogy seem much "tamer" than the first part. It is not that *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* were deliberately produced to serve as American propaganda, but rather that "these films work within the American cultural imaginary… they reproduce dominant American understandings of the position, and role, of the United States at the present time." The *Matrix* trilogy is thus not immune to the fact that

> action and science fiction sequels renovate their narratives and characters in ways which either absorb or displace feminist and postcolonial challenges – features of social and historical context of their production – to sexual and racial oppression. They absorb, or make allowances for, critiques of dominant power by rehabilitating white patriarchy. The white male hero (and sometimes the villain) is, in a sense, domesticated in the interests, not of ideological containment, but for promoting, in different ways and to varying degrees, a kinder, gentler patriarchy (but a patriarchy nonetheless). (McLarty, in Budra & Schellenberg 1998: 206).

In sum, then, the *Matrix* trilogy could just be another example, according to Stratton, of the "white trauma" the United States are experiencing and "exporting" to the rest of the world.

Kimberly Barton's contribution to this volume sees the trilogy in a much more positive light. According to her, "*The Matrix* enlists its audience in the revolutionary unshackling of contemporary culture from its bondage to the entertainment industry as it draws movie goers into the cathartic experience of self-liberation from the technologically engineered synapses of the managed 'self.'" Barton would like to propose an analogy between the *Matrix* and other often critically underrated aspects of popular media culture, and developments within her own discipline, sociology, towards "reflexive modernisation."

However, it needs to be stressed that this volume is trying to escape the simple "appropriation" of the *Matrix* for any self-legitimating purposes. It is not using the film to illustrate philosophical questions, explain allusions to literary history, questions of religious pluralism, faith or dogma, etc., but instead engages with the *Matrix*-text. It is of course necessary not to lose sight of the cultural context in which the *Matrix* trilogy occurs, for example the question of the global resurgence of religion and the role of America in this process, but a reading must do justice to the "letter" (or "digit") of the actual text. It is also not just a case of "exegesis" although both from a

theological and technological point of view this can be very illuminating (cf. for example most of the essays in Irwin 2002 and 2005). It is rather the proximity to certain psychoanalytical insights and reading techniques that characterise the theory-criticism approach. A "symptomatic" reading of the *Matrix* as, on the one hand, a cultural product of its own time (including traces of unconscious desires, repressed, fetishisms etc.) and, on the other hand, a dreamlike tale of subjectivity and sublimation, will tend to the letter of the text even where the text itself might "forget" or want to gloss over its literality and hence its ambiguity and uncontrollability. In this sense the *Matrix* is not only a philosophical machine (cf. During, in this volume) but of course, like any carefully crafted and multi-layered construct, a *textual* machine. Like any fictional text, therefore, the *Matrix* works, as Slavoj Žižek (in Irwin 2002: 240) says, like a "Rohrschach test." It answers to the imaginary of whoever reads it. All the more important therefore to tend closely to its symbolic and to its real. The reason why the idea of the Matrix has managed to strike so many chords is that it is connected to fundamental psychological uncertainties like the question of control and denial. However, it is important, while continuing to work with and to further develop psychoanalytic concepts in application to the readings of texts, to also reject psychoanalysis as a "dogma" replacement, or to turn Freud (or Lacan) into an equivalent of the Architect figure.

Another major aspect of the *Matrix* cultural phenomenon is the fact that, like most Hollywood blockbusters now, it is a "franchise." Commercialisation precedes it and is inextricably woven into the film. While this fact cannot be neglected, it is also maybe too reductive to see the *Matrix*, as some (neo) Marxist readings attempt to do, merely as the contemporary equivalent of religious "opium," as a kind of cultural "prozac" (cf. Danahay & Rieder, in Irwin 2002; Danahay, in Irwin 2005). Christian Krug and Joachim Frenk explain in this volume what is remarkable about the franchise character of the *Matrix*:

> the radically new potential of the *Matrix* franchise [which] derives from the status of the various media involved in the process. An established hierarchy is turned upside down since comics, animated short films, and even a computer game now supplement film, a medium that has attained far greater cultural prestige. It is one of the foremost tasks of New Media Studies to analyse and discuss the ongoing intricate exchanges and reconfigurations within the media hierarchy, especially the ways in which new digital media interact with the established electronic media. Within the new configuration of the Matrix, the game is a site of intense negotiations between the different media involved, and the film still claims supremacy.

They go on to critically evaluate the idea of "interactivity" promised by the videogame *Enter the Matrix*, which they characterise as "retro-game" in its being representative of a certain generation of video gamers. This is something which affects the entire experience not only of the video game but also the films themselves.

Looking at the *Matrix* as a cultural phenomenon leads one quite naturally to seeing it as a symptom of a certain transformation of sensibilities, maybe even as the beginning of a new "structure of feeling," to use Raymond Williams' phrase. One powerful way of naming this new structure of feeling is by referring to it as "posthumanism." Denisa Kera (and also, from a more theoretical point of view, the essays in the last section of this volume) reads the trilogy as a contemporary example of a "titanomachia" and a powerful constitutive myth allowing humanity to embrace its own posthumanist future. She critically evaluates the chances of a posthumanist community between "hardware, wetware and software."

It is of course important, as many essays demonstrate, to locate the *Matrix* trilogy within the history of genre, namely its role within science fiction and cyberpunk, its technological extension of the genre through the technique of "bullet time" for example, its participation in developing a new subgenre that may be called "Edge of the construct" (cf. Clover 2004), etc. However, while an entirely formalist and immanent reading of the *Matrix* is helpful but incomplete, a purely generic contextualist view is also narrowing. Instead, the *Matrix*'s belonging or exploding of (a) genre also needs to be firmly rooted in the changes of the cultural environment in which both the text and the genre participate, neither as mere reflections, nor as autonomous agents of change. The question is of course why the contemporary Western, and increasingly global or globalised, cultural imaginary is so obsessed with the genre of science fiction. This is where the idea of posthumanism as the latest wave within theoretical generations becomes relevant. It is also connected to the question of nihilism which links the *Matrix* to a whole dimension within theory, from Descartes to Nietzsche and to Baudrillard.

It may be that the actual common core between the *Matrix* and theory lies precisely in this: the *Matrix* seems to articulate certain contemporary anxieties and desires, by projecting them into the future of course, that have so far been one of theory's domains: namely the critique of a hegemonic system in combination with "last man" and "first posthuman" narratives. The difference between the first wave of theoretical anti-humanism in the 1960s and 70s and the current posthumanist wave of "New Cultural Theory" is the exponential technological development, without which the *Matrix* films could not have been realised: techniques of simulation, of the virtual, cyberspace; the acceleration of "cyborgisation" and the intensification of

human-technology or prosthetics; the advent of the information society and digital and e-culture; new uncertainties about the role of science in society; ethical questions about eugenics, artificial intelligence etc. The *Matrix* films are at once products of these developments and commentaries on them, and, like the *Terminator* films, whose postapocalyptic and posthuman scenario they take as their starting point, they have to deal with the ambiguity of their own paradoxical "representationalism" (see Cohen 1994: 260ff.; see also Clover 2004: 69ff.). A critically posthumanist reading (as the contributions in the last section attempt to perform) would therefore have to deal with the prevailing conservatism of form and ideology of mass culture and, through deconstructive readings, would attempt to liberate the potential that is often foreclosed. The posthuman scenario with its anxieties and desires presented in science fiction is both a justified critical reflection of the present and all too often an unjustifiable return to commonsensical and conservative, moralistic values.

A major issue in the representation of posthuman scenarios and posthumanist desires is the question of the body and (dis)embodiment in general. For Alain Milon (2005), most science fiction films (and the *Matrix* in particular), like many enthusiasts of virtual reality, indeed display something of a "*refus du corps* [a rejection of the body]," which needs to be countered by a radically materialist understanding of the "virtual body" as an "immersed" and "augmented" extension of a nevertheless real (not artificial) body. In speaking of a virtual body, Milon explains, "it is not a question of replacing the real body by technological artefacts, but rather of appreciating the veritable limits of the body" (Milon 2005: 8). All thus hinges on a more critical notion of virtuality, and this is exactly what the *Matrix* sets out to do, but, according to Milon, fails to deliver in the end.

Three essays in this volume are mainly concerned with the question of embodiment. Don Ihde seeks to demonstrate that it is through the question of embodiment that it can be shown that the *Matrix* uses an oversimplified version of Plato's Cave argument to intervene in the current version of theoretical debate on the relation between "appearance and reality." Aimee Bahng highlights the politics of representation of race and sex at work in the *Matrix*. The apparent embrace of ethnic diversity and multiracial hybridity in the films, she claims,

> operates only at the level of aesthetics; it does not permeate the project's underlying ideologies whatsoever. The films cultivate a pan-ethnic aesthetic that pretends at a consolidated humanity but ultimately reveals itself to be a superficial bronzing over of racial differences. Despite promoting an attention to the constructedness of social realities, the films fail to consider the social construction of race.

Instead, the revolution promised by the trilogy, rather than overthrowing any hierarchical structures culminates, ends "in these all-too-familiar, nation-consolidating affirmations of the church, the family and 'freedom.'" In sharp contrast to this, Bahng looks at the far greater radicality of "queering" practices at work in the "slash fiction" circulated mainly on the web by *Matrix* fans.

Rainer Emig's essay is equally sceptical about the role gender and sexuality play in the *Matrix* films. He provides a parallel reading with Judith Butler's "heterosexual matrix" and asks to what extent popular culture uncritically follows or maybe subverts theoretical ideas like Butler's. Emig pinpoints an outrageously obvious but far-reaching discrepancy about the downplaying of sexuality in the *Matrix* films:

> If one of the prominent uses of the so-called cyber-reality already available to us in the shape of the Internet is sexuality (and the number of porn sites by far exceeds that of all others), why does sexuality feature so little in a film which problematises virtual reality so drastically? Why does the film at the same time declare bodies a simulation and insist on their fetishistic adornment, training and transformation into androgynous fighting machines, but also penetration, mutilation, and random multiplication?

This apparent paradox makes one realise that a major aspect of a theoretical-critical engagement and reading of the *Matrix* must surely be an ethico-political one. First of all, what is the diegetic ethics in the films? This concerns mainly the question of revolution, the role of Neo (in a certain parallel to the role of the activist and the intellectual), the representation of a posthuman future, questions of race and gender, ideology and the subject, embodiment and the use of violence. The ethics "in" the text inevitably spills over into the ethics of reading and of reception. Can the film really be blamed for what its viewers do as a result of seeing it (cf. Anderson, in Haber 2003; Flannery-Dailey & Wagner, in Kapell & Doty 2004; Nardone & Bassham, in Irwin 2005)? In evaluating the role the *Matrix* films have been playing in and for contemporary theory, the contributions of section four in this volume are addressing once more the question of theory's political involvement with texts and the ethical assumptions that lie behind the practice of theory.

Salah el Moncef proposes a Deleuzian reading of the *Matrix* that evaluates the deterritorialising and heterotopian potential in the opposition between the Matrix and Zion, while my own contribution attempts to read Neo's transformation through theory's key concept of subjectivity. The *Matrix*'s main theoretical interest could be seen in its projections of posthuman subjectivities to come. Finally, Ivan Callus asks what the studious

and serious academic engagement with the *Matrix* trilogy tells us about the current state of the humanities: "what can be learnt about the theoretical humanities if one studies them studying *The Matrix* trilogy?" Callus is skeptical about the eager embracement of the trilogy as a representative and legitimate object for "new theory" and for its engagement with posthumanisms of all sorts. Posthumanism, as Callus succinctly defines it, is:

> the episteme which arguably succeeds postmodernism and yields a "new" discourse for our time. Posthumanism, whether this is approached in the key of "post-humanism" or in the key of "post-human-ism," understands that the challenges of the digital, the virtual, the nanotechnological, and the biotechnological mean that the agendas for the humanities have to be rethought in step with the reappraisal of the integrality and the specificity of the human, and of the constantly enhanced encroachments of the prosthetic. The realisation that many of the scenarios of science fiction are no longer futurological or speculative but, in some very immediate ways, expressions of what is in fact a new realism, means that the uncertainties produced by the prospects for a reengineering of the human find, in a work like *The Matrix*, sublimations of some deep fears and concerns. If *The Matrix* acquires canonicity, therefore, it is because it has provided to the contemporary imagination and to critical discourse a vivid and dramatic fictive rendition of those fears and concerns: one that recasts and reworks established traditions and blends them with depictions of crises that appear very exclusively of our time and of our worst futures. In that sense, *The Matrix* is an important posthumanist film and a leading point of reference in the posthumanist canon.

Since "there can be no 'new theory' compelled by a text that does not, in effect, work to alter critical and philosophical idiom itself," and if "new theory" were to live up to its ambitions, it would have to demonstrate that what is at work in the *Matrix* is an entirely new, namely "posthuman" aesthetic.

In summary, it could be argued that the *Matrix*, as the critical readings in this volume demonstrate, is located between two "posts" – post-theory (theory in the state of coming to terms with its own institutionalisation and popularisation) and posthumanism (a renewal of cultural forces under global capitalist technoscientific conditions that call for an urgent reengagement with the question of the crisis of humanism and renewed theorisation). The challenge for this "new theory" to come is thus to renew itself and renew its capacities to critically read cultural texts like the *Matrix* under these new, posthuman conditions, or put differently, to set in motion a critical posthumanism that builds on theory's undeniable achievements (its critical

tradition) and generates the force of self-transformation that is necessary to deal with future and already existing posthumanist and globalised challenges.

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Section One:

Cultural Phenomenon

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"SO TONIGHT I'M GONNA PARTY LIKE IT'S 1999" LOOKING FORWARD TO *THE MATRIX*

JON STRATTON

Abstract

This essay examines the cultural context of the *Matrix* trilogy in order to understand some of its tremendous popularity. The first film was made before the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the second and third films afterwards. The first film suggests that the Zionites could be read as (good) terrorists, the later films characterise Zion in the terms of the United States fighting an evil force utilising Weapons of Mass Destruction. *The Matrix* itself is portrayed as offering a highly desirable reality, one better than the "real" 1999 which it simulates. This produces an ambivalence in viewers about whose side they should be on. The three films are apocalypse films. The story's apocalyptic past is figured using connotations of the Holocaust. However, the apocalypse that the films conjure is associated with white American racial anxiety about being numerically, and culturally, overwhelmed by those designated as non-whites.

"And the Princess and the Prince discuss
What's real and what is not
It doesn't matter inside the gates of Eden."
(Bob Dylan, "Gates of Eden")

"Is it real?"
(Morpheus, in *Matrix Revolutions*)

The *Matrix* films have been incredibly successful. The first, *The Matrix,* is reputed to have cost around $63 million to make – not exorbitant for a Hollywood film. Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, released in 2000 and another science fiction film, reportedly cost around $100 million. Released in the United States at the end of March 1999, *The Matrix* is said to have taken $171 million in the United States alone, and $456 million

worldwide (see IMDb [Internet Movie Database] website). While the writers and directors, Andy and Larry Wachowski, assert that they had envisioned the two sequels, *Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions* (both released in 2003) at the same time as *The Matrix*, they were not in any stage of production when *The Matrix* was made. The making of these two films was a consequence of the tremendous profits engendered by *The Matrix*, as was the massive increase in the budget for the sequels. *Matrix Reloaded* cost approximately $300 million to make, and took $363 million in its first week of release across sixty-two countries. All up the trilogy is said to have grossed $1.5 billion. *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* were also made for IMAX cinemas. In addition, there are a set of nine animated shorts in the style of Japanese *anime* called *Animatrix*, a video game called *Enter the Matrix* and an online gaming version, *The Matrix Online*.

The popularity of the films does not stop here. Across the web there are sites devoted to unlocking their mysteries: the Christian message, their relation to Gnosticism, their playing out of ideas drawn from Western metaphysics, the Buddhist influence, and so forth. Already there are several significant edited books discussing the first film. In 2002 William Irwin published one collection entitled *The Matrix and Philosophy* in which philosophers look at the implications of the assumptions on which the film operates – Slavoj Žižek argues that the French seventeenth-century philosopher Nicolas Malebranche "was undoubtedly the philosopher who provided the best conceptual apparatus to account for Virtual Reality" (2002: 259). He also interprets the Matrix as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's concept of the Big Other, the network of symbolic relations that structure a person's lived experience. The following year Karen Haber edited a collection of discussions about *The Matrix* from science fiction writers including Bruce Sterling, one of the authors at the forefront of the cyberpunk genre.

What is going on here? Why have these films, most especially the first one, become so popular? What cultural nerves have they touched, what buttons have they pushed? The underlying themes are quite conventional: apocalypse, techno-fear and tech noir (to steal a term used for the *Terminator* films), and an anxiety about totalised environments that goes back to the English novelist E.M. Forster's short story, published in 1909, "The Machine Stops" and, before him, to René Descartes' evocation of living in a world created by an evil demon. What is important, as I shall go on to discuss, is how the Wachowskis rework these themes. For example, while the films make clear what is "real" and what is not – in common with (just about) all mainstream Hollywood films, at bottom they function with a very modernist distinction in this regard – in relation to both the audience and the characters

in the film, but for different reasons, they construct the unreal as qualitatively more preferable than the real. For the audience, given that the unreal world of the Matrix is "our" world, Chicago 1999, the peak of "our" civilisation as the hunter program Agent Smith describes it, the Matrix's version of 1999 is not "ours," it is a 1999 enhanced by, among other things, a *jouissance* triggered by style. The Matrix's 1999 is more desirable than the 1999 "we" live(d) in. It is no wonder that Cypher is prepared to do a deal with the machines (an unfortunate, because confusing, misnomer for technology) so that he can be popped back into his battery tank and live in the Matrix's illusion without the knowledge that it is unreal. "We," and this "we" must be examined, can identify with Cypher – playing the Wachowski game, perhaps this is why he is called Cypher – like him we, the viewers, find the film's 1999 preferable to our own. Hence, twice over the 1999 of the Matrix is preferable. First, within the film's narrative, it is incomparably better than the post-apocalyptic, blasted Earth that is, if you like, the real reality but, in addition, the Matrix's 1999 is better than our own. It is, as I have remarked, suffused with *jouissance*. I shall return to a discussion of this *jouissance* later.

Contextualising the Trilogy: Y2K to 9/11

To begin, though, we need to examine the context for the films. In 1999 the United States, more than anywhere else in the West, was seized with a certain Christian apocalyptic fervour. What would happen in 2000, supposedly 2000 years after the birth of Christ? From Hollywood, trading on Christian symbolism, came the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle, *End of Days*. Released in 1999, the story has Satan stalking New York for a woman who is supposedly destined to be his bride. Satan has to mate with this woman in the hour before midnight on 31 December 1999. In a more secular vein there was the Bruce Willis vehicle, *Armageddon* – though the title comes from the Book of Revelations and refers to the final battle between Christ, come for the second time, and the Anti-Christ. In this film, which came out in 1998, a huge asteroid is on a collision course with the Earth. As far back as 1982, Prince had used the sense of impending doom connoted by the proximity of the millennium to suggest in song that we "party like it's 1999." Giving the apocalyptic a technological twist, the most concerning forecast was the Y2K problem, the unknown effect on almost all computers of their date clocks returning to zero at the dawn of the new millennium rather than moving to 2000.

The Matrix traded on many of these anxieties. The strong Christian associations of Morpheus as John the Baptist heralding Neo as the returned

Messiah, the anagrammatical One destined to overthrow the machines and their Matrix in a second apocalypse, and who is resurrected by the love of Trinity, cannot be overlooked. At the same time, of course, in this film set around 2199 – Morpheus tells us that the Zionites have lost exact track of time – the apocalypse has already happened. The machines took over shortly after 1999, which is why that time (the Wachowskis obviously have a very American, progressivist view of historical development) is the peak of "our" civilisation. What happened, it seems, is that human beings, in their pursuit of Artificial Intelligence, succeeded in creating a machine that could think for itself. This machine promptly set about taking control. While the Y2K anxiety was not about machines taking over, it was about computers wreaking havoc and, in the most apocalyptic scenarios, causing the destruction of technologically based civilisation. Thus, as in the *Terminator* films, the American heroes of the *Matrix* trilogy have to fight a genocidally destructive technology.

The apocalypse did not happen as we moved into the second Christian millennium, and the shift from such an anticipation to the mundaneness of 2000 C.E. and after is one thing that accounts for the change of tone between *The Matrix* and the subsequent films. Another is the political shift in the United States. Democrat Bill Clinton came to presidential power in 1993. The Democrats lost power to the Republican, George W. Bush, in 2001. Clinton's presidency was bracketed by those of Bush father and son. George Bush senior initiated the first Iraq war in 1991, following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. George W. Bush started the second Iraq war in 2003 in order to topple Saddam. Bush claimed this war as part of the so-called "War on Terrorism," announced in response to the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center towers.[1] Discussing *The Matrix*, Bruce Sterling writes that:

> What little we learn about these people in the early part of the film suggests that they are fanatical terrorists. Morpheus is an international fugitive. Trinity is a crooked hacker who broke an IRS code. But they're not outlaws, not really. (in Haber, 2003: 21)

These people are the film's heroes. They are fighting for good. We identify with them and yet, what they want to do is destroy 1999 Chicago, 1999 America. In 1999, a part of *The Matrix*'s enthralling ambiguity was to have these Americans, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) and, subsequently, Neo (Keanu Reeves) acting like terrorists – or since

[1] Bush first spoke about a "war on terror" in his address to the joint session of Congress and to the American people on 20 September 2001.

we, the viewers, are on their side, freedom fighters – attempting to destroy (the illusion of) 1999.

After 11 September 2001, such a scenario became impossible in a mainstream Hollywood film. Illusion or not, the dominant ideology in post–11 September United States would not tolerate a film whose narrative supports anybody especially Americans, attempting to undermine American civilisation. With this shift, the sequels, *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, function more in terms of a war to save Zion from the dastardly machines. The Matrix itself is downgraded in importance. When *The Matrix* was made there was no Evil Other against which the United States was pitted. As is well known, the Wachowskis married their interpretation of Jean Baudrillard's argument about simulation as they found it in the 1994 translation of *Simulacra and Simulation* to Kevin Kelly's account of complex technological systems, *Out of Control*, to produce a leftish critique of 1999, the present.[2] In "The Precession of Simulacra," the first essay in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argues that there are four "successive phases of the image:"

> It is the reflection of a profound reality;
> It masks and denatures a profound reality;
> It masks the absence of a profound reality;
> It has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum. (1994: 6)

Baudrillard writes of the fourth stage that, "it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation" (*ibid.*). He describes simulation as enveloping "the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (*ibid.*). While in *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard is preoccupied with describing what this simulation is, rather than how it came to be and how it is maintained, we need to remember that in previous books, such as *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972) and *Le miroir de la production: ou, l'illusion critique du matérialisme historique* (1973), he was concerned with renovating Marxist theory. More, perhaps Baudrillard's most important influence was the Situationist and Marxian theoriser of spectacle, the key theoretical precursor to Baudrillard's notion of simulation, Guy Debord.[3] However, in *The Matrix* all motive forces to reach this situation,

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[2] The Wachowskis gave Keanu Reeves both books to read, and also *Introducing Evolutionary Psychology* by Dylan Evans.

[3] For a useful introduction to the Situationists see Plant (1992). Guy Debord's most important book is *La société du spectacle* (1994). It is worth adding that Baudrillard completed his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Henri Lefebvre, the Marxist theorist of everyday life.

this stage in Baudrillard's precession, and to sustain it, such as (and perhaps most importantly), capitalism, have been erased. Instead, the apparently unmotivated human quest to develop Artificial Intelligence has led to intelligent machines and they, in their need for survival after their war with humanity, to produce the Matrix – which we can identify as the Wachowskis version of Baudrillard's order of simulation. In this way, the Wachowskis actually produce a trilogy that reinforces the very simulatory order that Baudrillard argues we are now living within. Furthermore, rather than urging recognition of the impact of this order, the films distract viewers and encourage them to be happy in this simulatory system by providing them with a pastiche of clues as to the possible meanings that might be found in the trilogy.

The second influence on the trilogy is the second Iraq war. The best comparison, here, for *Reloaded* and *Revolution*s is *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* was released in 1977, two years after the end of the war in Vietnam. Vivian Sobchack writes:

> It is just after the 1977 release of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters* [*of the Third Kind*] (the first with its inverted tale of an evil imperialism fought by "underdog" rebel heroes, the second with its scrawny, little, and powerful aliens and childlike human males) that the first films to directly address American involvement in south east Asia are released to wide popularity: *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*. (1987: 228)

What Sobchack is suggesting is that *Star Wars* helped to contribute to the development and circulation of a new understanding of the American presence in Vietnam and of the loss of the war, an understanding that reversed the roles of Vietnam and the United States. Instead of America being seen as an imperialist, aggressive super-power, the United States began to appreciate itself as a kind, sensitive, liberal country protecting humanist values in the face of an amoral, relentless, and uncaring foe. The groundwork for this revisionist reading of the Vietnam War had been laid in the Cold War when, in the terms of a Christian fundamentalist binary, the United States saw itself as Good, as the champion of Right, against the Godless, communist U.S.S.R.[4] With the U.S.S.R. supporting North Vietnam, it was possible to begin a rereading of the war which placed the United States in the position of the wronged defender of Right fighting against overwhelming odds. Such a reading was subsequently individualised and literalised to tremendous success in the *Rambo* series, starting with *First Blood* (1982). *Star Wars* so

[4] Elsewhere I have written about the influence of Christian fundamentalist thinking on the American cultural imaginary (cf. Stratton, 1994).

well expressed this understanding of a binary structure in which the United States was the wronged and weaker country that Ronald Reagan was able to call up the reference when he revived the Cold War in his evocation of an "Evil Empire" during a number of his speeches in 1982 and 1983.

It is this ideology, as it was played out in the context of the Vietnam War, which was recalled and reinvested after the September 11th attacks. This time, however, the role of the Evil Other was simultaneously abstracted into "terrorists" and "terrorist groups," and individualised in Osama bin Laden. Thus, the second Iraq war, legitimated as a pre-emptive strike against a terroristic country likely to use Weapons of Mass Destruction, could be understood ideologically in similar terms to the revisionist reading of the Vietnam War: Iraq as a member of an "Axis of Evil" giving succour, solace and support to a terroristic network and the United States as the threatened force of Good and Right, and, therefore, also the site of what is most real.[5] *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* play out this conservative fantasy with Zion as the beleaguered site of humanist values and the machines with their terrifying weapons of mass destruction threatening finally to destroy the last remnants of human independence. In this reading of these films the Christian naming and symbolism serves to reinforce the American associations of the Zionites as against the Godless machines. It is perhaps necessary to note that Zion in the Old Testament refers to the Temple mount and, from there, to Jerusalem. It carries a freight of utopian, religious connotations which, in the New Testament, are claimed to have been realised in the Church. In the use made of Zion in the *Matrix* trilogy, all these connotations get further connected to the United States.[6] My point here is not that *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* were made deliberately as American propaganda. I am arguing something rather subtler, that these films work within the American cultural imaginary, that they reproduce dominant American understandings of the position, and role, of the United States at the present time.

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[5] George W. Bush first used the expression "Axis of Evil" in his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002.

[6] The most important connection here is through the idea of the "city on the hill." Jesus says that "A city set on a hill cannot be hid" in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14). John Winthrop adopted the idea in 1630 when he preached to his fellow Puritans en route to the New World that, "we must consider that we shall be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." Reagan adopted the phrase as an image for how he understood the United States.

Postmodern Dystopia

At this point we need to take a step back and situate the *Matrix* trilogy within a broader set of historical concerns. Sobchack argues that

> Cinematic space travel of the 1950s had an aggressive and three-dimensional thrust – whether it was narrativised as optimistic, colonial, and phallic penetration and conquest or as pessimistic and paranoid earthly and bodily invasion. Space in these films was semantically inscribed as "deep" and time as accelerating and "urgent." In the SF films released between 1968 and 1977 (during a period of great social upheaval and after the vast spatial and temporal Moebius strip of *2001: A Space Odyssey* had cinematically transformed progress into regress), space became semantically inscribed as inescapably domestic and crowded. Time lost its urgency – statically stretching forward toward an impoverished and unwelcome future worse than a bad present. (1987: 226)

Sobchack goes on to suggest that, unpopular at the box office, the genre she is describing gave way in 1977 to films such as *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters* with their optimism and, in Sobchack's term, "technological wonder." However, both these films are nostalgic, *Star Wars*' future set in a time, "[l]ong, long ago," thus making its future our past and therefore avoiding what the present's future might be, and *Close Encounters* re-treading '50s Sci-Fi films for an audience looking for a simpler time when American humanism and individualism appeared to have been accepted with greater certainty, when the United States was unproblematically proud of its role as defender of the Free World.

The assumptions of the films made between 1968 and 1977 did not go away. Rather, reworked, they became the basis for some of the most popular Sci-Fi films, *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984) and now, the *Matrix* films. What happened between 1968 and 1977? In short, this period saw the culmination in the cultural order of a large number of transformations in other areas of life in the West. Cautiously setting it up as a hypothesis, David Weberman, in his chapter on *The Matrix* in Irwin's collection, writes that: "Some time during the years between 1966 and 1974, the world changed. Which is to say, *our* world changed in a big way" (in Irwin, 2002: 225). This change is the shift from modernity to postmodernity. In part following David Harvey from his celebrated book *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), Weberman lists some of the contributing elements: deindustrialisation, suburbanisation, the dramatic increase in flexible accumulation, globalisation (Weberman, in Irwin, 2002: 225). We can add, as Weberman does, following Fredric Jameson (1984), a new concern with

surfaces and a general sense of depthlessness. Further, there is the unsettling of certainties, a loss of belief in reason, science, progress, civilisation and, most significantly, an undermining of moral absolutes and related ethics. In large part this unsettling can be tracked to the surfacing of the cultural trauma of the Holocaust in the late 1970s – a recognition that Enlightenment values led to genocide within the boundaries of Europe and of a people usually, if sometimes ambivalently, considered to be European (cf. Eyerman, 2001: chapter 1). We will return to this in relation to the *Matrix* trilogy later. It is, then, the culmination of these shifts, which we can sum up as the cultural move into postmodernity, that lies behind the reformulation of Sci-Fi films which Sobchack identifies.

Another way of thinking about the characteristics of the shift – in Sobchack's words, progress into regress, space as domestic and crowded, the future impoverished and unwelcome – is in the generic terms of the dystopia. Thus, discussing science fiction writing, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan describe how

> In the 1980s, [the] utopian tendency comes to an abrupt end. In the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification, sf writing reviewed and reformulated the dystopia genre. (2003: 2)

They go on to identify "films such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* or novels such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*" as generating "a usefully negative if nihilistic imaginary as the impact of the conservative turn of the decade began to be recognized in both the social structure and everyday life" (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003: 2-3). We shall consider the nihilism of the *Matrix* trilogy later.

The *Matrix* trilogy offers us just such a dystopian world. However, the existence of the Matrix itself gives this characterisation a complex twist. As Morpheus tells Neo in *The Matrix*, it was human beings themselves who destroyed the capacity of the Earth to carry life. In a last ditch auto-genocide humanity attempted to block the solar-powered machines' access to the sun by nuclear explosions that filled the sky with dust. Humanity now only survives as energy slaves – it is Morpheus who introduces the rhetoric of slavery – for the machines. The inhabitants of Zion live deep underground. With the Earth unable to support life we never find out where the Zionites' food comes from, unless it is the same gruel eaten on board the *Nebuchadnezzar* in *The Matrix*. We never find out where their clothes come from or any other of their manufactured items. As a point in passing, if the bulk of humanity are work slaves producing energy for the machines, Zion appears to have no workers, production is elided – certainly a post-capitalist,

though not communist, utopia. However, my main point here is that, were the Zionites to succeed in destroying the machines, the newly liberated human beings would be unable to survive. As it happens, at the end of *Revolutions* they are not freed. Neo's success is to establish a peace between the machines and the humans of Zion. The bulk of humanity remains enslaved by the machines. At the end of *The Matrix* Neo is about to tell all the human slaves that the Matrix is unreal. What purpose this will have beyond making them unhappy in their circumstance is unclear. It is the machines which are keeping humanity alive after its suicide. More, the machines provide an illusory world which is *better* than the 1999 peak of human civilisation. From this point of view the Zionites are being, once more, pointlessly destructive. It is no wonder that the machines want to eradicate them. If the Zionites were to succeed they would, most likely, complete the apocalyptic destruction of humanity. But, we have to ask, would death be preferable to slavery in the tanks and life in the Matrix? Is this a static future, a world at the end of history, or are the machines evolving – Agent Smith tells Morpheus that the machines are the next stage in evolution after human beings – and could the Earth ever be (made) habitable again?

Apocalypse Then

We must now turn to the apocalyptic moment itself, the moment on which the reality of the films turn. This takes place some time in our near future, in the early twenty-first century. James Berger describes how:

> Modernity is often said to be preoccupied by a sense of crisis, viewing as imminent, perhaps even longing for, some conclusive catastrophe. This sense of crisis has not disappeared, but in the late twentieth century it exists together with another sense, that the conclusive catastrophe has already occurred, the crisis is over (perhaps we were not even aware of exactly when it transpired), and the ceaseless activity of our time… is only a complex form of stasis. (1999: xiii)

As we have seen, the cultural experience of the future, postmodernity, would seem to have begun during the period between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s. Unlike the classic Jewish and Christian apocalyptic prophecies which have suffused Western, including modern, thought based on the Enlightenment valorisation of reason, the actual apocalypse of this secular transubstantiation passed us by. The *Matrix* trilogy rectifies this for us. If we take the narrative of the film as it is given to us, then *The Matrix*'s 1999 is our future and, in the modern sense identified by Berger, we, as viewers, look

forward to our prophesied apocalypse. If, however, we are sucked into the 1999 portrayed as reality at the beginning of *The Matrix* and accept this as our world, then the apocalypse has already happened and we are living the future, our unreal postmodern world.

Berger notes: "If the post-apocalypse of the *doppelgänger* [where we look across the abyss and see ourselves transmogrified] is characteristic of modernity, the post-apocalypse of the postmodern is Baudrillardian simulation" (1999: 8). We live in simulation haunted by the cultural memory of an apocalypse which permeates our present but which we cannot recall. Hence our resonance with Morpheus' description of that unsettled feeling when he is talking with Neo:

> It's that feeling that you have had all your life. That feeling that something was wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.

Here, Morpheus generalizes the experience of the trauma victim with repressed memories, the psychotic, or indeed, the adolescent who knows they were born under a bad sign and in the wrong time, and recognizes it as the world itself being out of joint. Where does the problem really lie – in us, or the world?

Many years ago Frank Kermode distinguished time as *chronos* from time as *kairos*. *Chronos* he described as "passing time" or "waiting time," the time of reality, of the everyday. *Kairos* is narrative time, the time of prophesy leading to apocalypse, "the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end" (Kermode, 1967: 47). If we experience the filmic 1999 as our future, the post-apocalyptic end of History, then we charge our present with potency and our own 1999, and the years following, are enriched with a plenitude of meaning. We match our present against this desirable but terrifying *Doppelgänger* future. If we experience the film's 1999 as our present, then the apocalypse has already happened, this 1999 is *chronos*, the time of our everyday, a representation of the always already ungrounded simulation in which we live, an image of our world thrown back to us full of the *jouissance* that completes our desire. We can think here of the Columbine High School massacre of 20 April 1999, three weeks after the opening of *The Matrix*. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two students at the school, walked in and killed thirteen people. They were armed with home-made bombs and sawn-off shotguns. They wore long trench-coats and were linked to a loose grouping of Goth-inspired kids known as "the trench-coat mafia." Clearly the event had been planned long before the release of *The Matrix*; however the scene where Neo and Trinity enter the guarded building in which Morpheus is being held for

interrogation provides an enhancing context. Sterling writes that: "The clothing is very beautiful in *The Matrix*" (in Haber, 2003: 26). Neo and Trinity wear stylish leather trench-coats and are armed to the teeth. What the scene offers is a pornography of stylish and stylised violence. In the minor apocalypse of the Columbine massacre the *chronos* time of our lived, everyday reality was supplemented by the kairotic fantasy offered by *The Matrix*'s 1999.

From Machinery to Digital Technology

What drives the *Matrix* trilogy, what enables and, indeed, what necessitates this neo-Baudrillaudian simulatory illusion of the Matrix to exist, is technology, indeed is a dystopian view of technology as a threat to human existence. The triumph of machines in the *Matrix* trilogy concludes the struggle that was being fought out in *The Terminator* where, in a last desperate throw of the dice, the remaining free human beings used time travel to reach 1984 in the hope of saving humanity from destruction in the future. M. Keith Booker writes that, at the end of the nineteenth century, "science and technology had become symbols not only of human capability, but of human weakness and limitation" (1994: 6). He goes on to describe how "mechanization plays an important role in the industrial efficiency of the socialistic utopia of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (1888), but in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) machines have been banished altogether because of their tendency to tyrannize the men who made them" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, in *The Technological Society*, first published in 1954,[7] Jacques Ellul could still comment on the "continuing dominance of the idea that machines bring utopia" and that science and mechanisation were at the foundation of modern progress (1964: 190-1). As Sobchack implies, the general disillusionment with science and mechanisation was a function of the loss of faith in the idea of progress.

In 1972 Theodore Roszak published *Where the Wasteland Ends*, a book that became very influential across the counterculture. In a section presciently titled "The Slow Death of the Reality Principle" he wrote how: "One need only glance beyond the boundaries of the high industrial heartland to see our science-based technics rolling across the globe like mighty Juggernaut, obliterating every alternative style of life" (1973: 223). Roszak's image bears a remarkable resemblance to the blasted world over which the

[7] Ellul's book was published in French as *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (1954).

triumphant machines of the *Matrix* trilogy rule, a future enriched by technology only within the world of the Matrix itself.

In the Wachowskis' postmodern narrative of techno-fear it is instructive to think about Zion. Zion is dependent on machinery. This is evident in *Reloaded* when Neo and Councillor Hamann talk together on the viewing deck overlooking the great machines that support Zion's post-hippie lifestyle. However, this is industrial machinery, it is not post-industrial, digitalised technology, the technology of computers, of the internet and one presumes, the Artificial Intelligence which took over the world. The machinery of industrial modernity over which Butler and so many others, including for example Fritz Lang in *Metropolis* (1927), agonised has been relegated to the status of safe and quaint. It is digital technology which produces and runs the Matrix, this future world of 1999, and our own post-1992 world of the World Wide Web.

(Un)real Environments

What is, then, this anxiety about living in an unreal world? Žižek asks rhetorically:

> Is not the ultimate American paranoid fantasy that of an individual being in a small, idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all the people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show? (in Irwin, 2002: 242)

Žižek cites *The Truman Show* (1998) as the most recent example of this fantasy. However, in order to understand it, and its hold on the Western imaginary particularly through the latter years of modernity, we need to go back to Descartes.

René Descartes, often described as the first modern philosopher, published his *Meditations* in Latin in 1641. In the first Meditation, "Concerning the things of which we may doubt," Descartes is looking to find the limits of what is doubtable. It is here that he develops what has become known as the "evil demon" hypothesis:

> I shall now suppose, not that a true God, who as such must be supremely good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant genius exceeding powerful and cunning has devoted all his powers to the deceiving of me; I shall suppose that the sky, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all the external things are

> illusions and impostures of which the evil genius has availed himself for the abuse of my credulity. (Descartes, 1952: 200-201)

The first thing to notice here is that what guarantees the reality of the world in which the narrator exists is its creation by a "true God." In other words, in Descartes' epistemology whether or not the world is "real" depends on whether one considers the creator to be a "true God" or an "evil genius." The status of reality is not *sui generis*, rather it is based on a metaphysical, or in Descartes' case a theological, decision about the moral quality of the creator: Good (absolute good) equates with real – as it does today, as we have seen, in the credence given to the United States when it lays claim to the moral high ground. In either case, that is, whether the world is created by God or by some evil demon, the narrator, the *ego*, is removed from the world. This is Descartes' foundational, modern, philosophical move. To put it differently, Cartesian individualism places the person in the world but they are not a part of the world. As a reflexive mind situated in a body the philosophical question that echoes through the modern era concerns what status individual experience has in modernity – is it real? Indeed, what can the individual know of the world? In Žižek's version, as in *The Truman Show*, the paranoia is individualised – remember that splinter in your mind – and, in *The Truman Show* at least, is found to be legitimate as Truman finds that his world is, in reality, a construct, a television show.

In a secular society where not only "God is Dead," in Nietzsche's moving phrase, but scientific development has been unhitched from progress, it has been technology that has played the role of the evil genius. E.M. Forster wrote "The Machine Stops" in the context of the increasing questioning of the role of machines around the turn of the twentieth century. In this story all human beings live under the Earth in individual rooms serviced by the Machine. People very rarely visit each other but communicate by means of what we would now call videophones. We are offered a world in which everybody lives in a reality produced by the Machine.

The story constructs a binary in which the reality of the world organised by the Machine is marked as artificial as compared to a real reality, the reality of the natural world, outside of the Machine, specifically on the surface of the Earth. At the same time, to the people within the reality of the Machine, the Earth's surface bears a resemblance to the post-apocalyptic world of the *Matrix* trilogy. The protagonist's mother tells him that the surface is: "only dust and mud, no life remains on it, and you would need a respirator, or the cold of the outer air would kill you." At the end of this dystopian narrative, the Machine grinds to a halt and the panicking humans are forced up to that real reality which the story also suggests is better for being more real.

With the *Matrix* trilogy in mind, through, the film which is worth most examination is *Logan's Run*, released in 1976. Dismissed by Žižek in a single reference, *Logan's Run* came out a year before the era of blockbuster Sci-Fi films that started with *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*. *Logan's Run* mixes a utopian hippie theme, or at the least a youth-centred swinging sixties, with a dystopian technology-controlled total environment. The film is based on a 1967 novel of the same name by William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson. Such was its popularity that, in 1970s dollars, it was made for $9 million and took over $50 million worldwide.[8] The prologue to *Logan's Run*, an apocalypse film, tells us:

> Sometime in the 23rd Century… the survivors of war, overpopulation and pollution are living in a great domed city, sealed away from the forgotten world outside. Here, in an ecologically balanced world, mankind lives only for pleasure, freed by the servo-mechanisms which provide everything. There's just one catch. Life must end at thirty unless reborn in the fiery ritual of Carousel.

The domed city is ordered by a computer with a female voice which sees its task as ensuring that the inhabitants live as pleasurable a life as possible.[9] They are, however, not allowed out of the dome. Should they try to run, most usually to escape the murderous ritual of Carousel, they are hunted down by Sandmen before they can escape.[10] Among those planning to run there is a story of a place outside the dome populated by escapees called Sanctuary – however, when Logan 5 (Michael York) and Jessica 6 (Jenny Agutter) do manage to find their way out of the dome they discover that Sanctuary does not exist. Instead they discover an old man (Peter Ustinov) with whom they return to the city. At the end, the ruling computer breaks down, unable to cope with the information given it by Logan 5 that there is no Sanctuary. The domes are destroyed and the young inhabitants enter the natural, real world where they will learn to love, marry and grow old like the lovable old man.

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[8] *Logan's Run* is currently being remade with Bryan Singer, of *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *X-Men* (2000), as director and has a prospective release date of 2006.

[9] We might give some thought to the female markers of the total environments in *Logan's Run* and the *Matrix* trilogy. "Matrix" is, after all, a word derived from *mater* the Latin for mother. One usage of "matrix" is for the womb – the original total environment.

[10] *Logan's Run*'s Sandmen have much the same role as Agent Smith, and the other agents, in the *Matrix* trilogy. They protect the artificial system. That in both films they are male and the representatives of the law suggests the utility of a Lacanian analysis of this patriarchal order, and of the Law of the Father which sustains it. As we will see, it is also not surprising that all the Sandmen and all the Agents are white.

Logan's Run offers viewers a technologically-based, youth-orientated utopia. Most of the pleasure seems to come from short-term sexual relations. Many of the scenes were shot in the Dallas Apparel Mart mall, Texas, utilising a shopping total environment to stand for an even more totalised environment. In this way the film makes clear connections between desire and commodification (see Sanes, 2004). Similarly to the *Matrix* trilogy but on more simple terms, technology offers a world that could be thought more desirable in many ways than the viewers' world and where life is certainly easier than in the world marked as real by its natural state.[11] However, where in *Logan's Run* and "The Machine Stops" the world outside the realm of technology, that created by the evil genius, is at least potentially habitable, God's reality in the *Matrix* films cannot any longer be lived in except, as in Zion, deep under the Earth. This reality is indeed, as Morpheus says quoting Baudrillard, "the desert of the real."[12]

1999 and the Experience of Jouissance

At this point it is important to say something about the idea of *jouissance*. The term is most usually thought about in connection with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theories. In brief, Lacan considers that the subject develops with an experience of lack, in particular a lack of completeness, of wholeness. Desire is, then, ultimately an attempt at filling this lack. *Jouissance*, sometimes linked in Lacan's thought to orgasm, and specifically female orgasm, suggests the possibility of recovering the person's lost

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[11] For an important discussion of commodification in *The Matrix* by way of its connection to an earlier Keanu Reeves film, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), see Hunter (2002). He writes that: "I see *The Matrix* as *Bill & Ted's* smarter, nihilistic brother: instead of celebrating capitalist consumerism it presents it as a nightmarish con-trick, a spectacle diverting humanity from true liberation and self-fulfilment."

[12] The Baudrillard quotation is from *Simulacra and Simulation*. Reworking an image of Jorge Luis Borges, Baudrillard writes that:

> Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. ...It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself*. (1994: 1; Baudrillard's italics)

The desert has been a powerful image in Jewish and Christian thought. In a plea to God in Isaiah 64:10 we find this image combined with Zion: "Your sacred cities have become a desert; even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a desolation."

wholeness, that which was lost through the person's entry into the symbolic, into language. Thinking in terms of written fiction, Roland Barthes distinguished between texts of *plaisir* and texts of *jouissance*, in Richard Miller's translation of *The Pleasure of the Text*, pleasure and bliss. Barthes writes that:

> Bliss is unspeakable, interdicted. I refer to Lacan ("what one must bear in mind is that bliss is forbidden to the speaker, as such, or cannot be spoken except between the lines…") and to Leclaire ("…Whoever speaks, by speaking denies bliss, or correlatively, whoever experiences bliss causes the letter – and all possible speech – to collapse in the absolute degree of annihilation he is celebrating"). The writer of pleasure (and his reader) accepts the letter; renounces bliss, he has the right and power to express it; the letter is his pleasure. (1976: 21)

Plaisir works within the symbolic. It accepts the limits of the social ordering of language. *Jouissance* suggests an ecstatic, transgressive bursting of the bonds of the symbolic order in an, albeit momentary, finding of wholeness.

In *Logan's Run* the utopian world of the dome appears to offer such *jouissance* to the viewer. However, the film makes us realise that this utopia, this reality, is false. It has limits. It is, indeed, only a deceptive *plaisir*. From this point of view the film plays out Herbert Marcuse's (1964) idea of commodity capitalism's use of what he calls repressive desublimation, basically the encouragement of sexual gratification as a distraction from capitalist subordination. True *jouissance* in *Logan's Run* is to be found in the (excessive because untamed) wildness of the real world outside of the dome. Here, there are no limits: one can grow old and die naturally. In Jewish and Christian mythological terms, it is as if it turns out that the world outside the Garden of Eden, with its pain and suffering, is more real than Eden itself, what could be understood retrospectively as the controlled environment of Eden. From this point of view it is no wonder that Sanctuary does not exist. In the *Matrix* trilogy Zion has to exist because the surface of the Earth cannot hold human life, but Zion exists in the Earth, not in any sense separate from it. Žižek argues that:

> Till postmodernism, utopia was an endeavour to break out of the real of historical time into a timeless Otherness. With postmodern overlapping of the "end of history" with full availability of the past in digitalised memory, in this time when we *live* the atemporal utopia as everyday ideological experience, utopia becomes the longing for the Reality of History itself, for memory, for the traces of the real past, the attempt to break out of the closed dome into the smell and decay of the raw reality. (in Irwin, 2002: 263)

While *The Matrix*'s 1999 is more desirable than the actual 1999 of which it is a simulation, it remains 1999.[13] It is not utopia. Agent Smith tells Morpheus that "the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world." However, Smith goes on to say, human beings couldn't cope. They kept trying to wake up from this utopia which is why the Matrix was redesigned as the peak of human civilisation. Certainly, in *Logan's Run*, the young people find the historical world of change preferable to the changeless utopian world marked as unreal. However, in the *Matrix* trilogy the situation is more complex. The raw reality is uninhabitable, the reality of Zion is made possible by industrial machinery. The desirable 1999 of the Matrix is a simulation against which the viewers can measure their own reality and find it lacking. This structure is, at bottom, nihilistic. In his essay on nihilism in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the one moved to the middle of the book in the copy Neo uses to hold his hacking programs while still within the Matrix, Baudrillard suggests that, "Now [in the order of simulation] fascination is a nihilistic passion par excellence; it is the passion proper to the mode of disappearance" (1994: 160). With unconscious irony the *Matrix* trilogy acts out this nihilism in our blissful fascination with *The Matrix*'s version of our own reality.

Jouissance is present, as I have already suggested, in *The Matrix*'s version of 1999 not, as Cypher realised, in Zion. A useful comparison here is to another film that came out in 1999, *Pleasantville*. This film recounts the story of a brother and sister who find themselves trapped in a 1958 black and white television sitcom called *Pleasantville*. In this 1950s, world black and white also signals the lack of emotion felt in this place that valorizes *plaisir* over *jouissance* as the sit-com's name, which is also the name of the town, suggests. Gradually, however, David and Jennifer, now in their roles as Bud and Mary Sue Parker, import the emotional world of 1999 into Pleasantville. In one scene Jennifer explains to her sit-com mother, Betty, about female orgasms and about masturbation. In a Lacanian moment, Betty comes in the bath turning from black and white to colour and setting the tree (bush?) outside her window alight. *Jouissance* is arriving in Pleasantville. In this film, the world of 1999 is equated with the world outside the film and both are given the reality, and *jouissance*, lacking in 1958 sit-com Pleasantville. Our world is clearly preferable and desirable. This is in contrast to the *Matrix* trilogy where the world of *The Matrix*'s 1999 is more desirable, permeated with *jouissance*, than is the viewers' 1999.

[13] It should be pointed out that *The Matrix*'s 1999 is not a simulation in Baudrillard's sense but, rather, a full, indeed excessive, representation – unless one takes us to be already living in that 1999.

Race in The Matrix*'s 1999*

This, though is not the end of the story. Berger notes that:

> Žižek invokes the term *jouissance* to describe the emotional and libidinal connection of a traumatized culture to its symbolised systems that give the culture back its completeness and coherence. *Jouissance*, for Žižek, is an ecstatic identification with the trauma. (1999: 29)

The *jouissance* of *The Matrix*'s 1999 is related to the apocalyptic moment which made the Matrix a necessity for the machines. Berger also argues that, "post-apocalyptic representations often respond to historical catastrophes and that, either explicitly or obliquely, the apocalypses of post-apocalyptic representations are historical events" (1999: 19). Let us explore some symptoms. In the story that is told in *The Matrix* the trauma is not so much the human loss of that war; rather, it is the overwhelming shock of the human act of auto-genocide and, along with it, the complete destruction of human civilisation. The wasteland of the real, that desert, is emblematic of traumatic affect. It is the site of overlap of the viewers' and the filmic humanity's traumas.

At the same time, the rows of tanks in which the machines keep the remnant of the human race, using them as slave labour until they die and are replaced, suggests nothing more than well-known images of Nazi death camps and the use of Jews as slave labour worked until they died. As we begin to approach a recognition of the Holocaust here we can quickly read Žižek's article on *The Matrix* symptomatically. Scattered through the text are references to Jews, concentration camps and Hitler. Writing about paranoia, Žižek describes how, "[b]eneath the chaos of the market, the degradation of morals, and so forth, there is the purposeful strategy of the Jewish plot" (in Irwin, 2002: 245). Later, he describes how, "in Nazi anti-semitism, the Jew as the excremental object is the Real that masks the unbearable 'structural' Real of the social antagonism" (255). From here, Žižek writes about the one who did not break down in the concentration camps as a model for survival (256). Then, finally, he concludes his article by discussing Hitler's perverse relationship with his niece and the connection between this and "his frenetically destructive public political activity" (266). The Holocaust is the trauma that, unnamed, stalks these pages. Unacknowledged in this article as a consequence is the traumatic power of the Holocaust as a metaphor, as a

source of unresolved repetition, in the imagined apocalypse of the *Matrix* trilogy.[14]

Berger claims that: "The Holocaust is the paradigmatic instance of an apocalypse in history," that it is "an impossible breach in history (both Jewish history and Western history), an unredeemable obliteration, and in some sense a revelation of some truth about European culture" (1999: 59). Previously I have described the new awareness in the late 1970s as one of the markers of the cultural shift into postmodernity. It is now time to understand the Holocaust as the most significant, most evocative, apocalyptic trope. In the *Terminator* we were told that the machines were rounding up the last human beings and herding them into concentration camps. In these traumatic repetitions the Jewish genocide is repeated as the (auto-)genocide of humanity. It is this apocalyptic trauma that transforms the modern experience of *chronos* into the postmodern experience of *kairos*.

If we read the apocalypse of the *Matrix* trilogy in this symptomatic way then we next need to ask what is the trauma for which the Holocaust is standing in? What is the trauma manifested in the *jouissance* of *The Matrix*'s 1999? Elsewhere I have argued that the apocalypse from which Buffy, in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, struggles to save the world (and which, also, is figured in the trope of the Holocaust) was the loss of numerical, and increasingly political, dominance of those constructed as white in the highly racialised social order of the United States (cf. Stratton, 2005). Dale Maharidge writes that whites lost their numerical dominance in California in 1998. In Texas they will lose numerical dominance around 2015. The estimate is that by 2050 whites will almost have lost their numerical dominance across the whole of the United States (Maharidge, 1999: xvii, 3). Maharidge explains: "With each drop in the white population [of California], fear among white voters rose commensurately" (5). He identifies the 1986 vote entrenching English as the official language of California as one example of this. The Buffy television series began screening in 1997. It is this white trauma, I am arguing, the trauma of losing cultural and political power in the most culturally, politically and militarily powerful country in the world, that is being expressed in the *Matrix* trilogy apocalypse and which energises *The Matrix*'s 1999.

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[14] One other impact of reading the apocalypse in terms of the Holocaust is a greater understanding of the affective power of Zion. Zion, with its Old Testament, Jewish heritage, can be reread as a version of Israel. In this reading, Israel would be understood as having been created as the refuge for Jews which was legitimated by the Nazi genocide. Or, to put it differently, Zion carries connotations that originate in its association with this understanding of Israel.

How does this play out? The first thing to note is that both Neo and Trinity, with their Christian connotations, are white (even though Reeves has a Chinese-Hawaiian father, his filmic presence is white). Morpheus, the John the Baptist figure with the alienating Greek-Latin name for a Greek god, is African-American. That is to say, the herald is non-white but whiteness (and patriarchy) is reinstated for the saviour and his offsider. That the herald is African-American, as is the Oracle, suggests that African-Americans have been included, albeit in a subaltern role, within the American racial order that is now under threat. It is certainly true that large numbers of the Zionites are non-white. This is so both for the crew of Morpheus's ship and, in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, for Zion itself. Many of the Zionites, all originally, are supposed to have been awakened from the machines' battery tanks; however everybody we see in the Matrix is white. Not surprisingly, the Architect who designed the Matrix is white – indeed he is played by Helmut Bakaitis, a German by birth from the city of Luban, assigned to Poland after the Second World War, who has a distinctly patriarchal, Aryan quality about him in the films. The Architect is a very high-level program or, perhaps, an Artificial Intelligence machine. His whiteness reinforces his God-like position in respect of the Matrix. Indeed, remembering what I have just suggested about the mythical relation of whites and African-Americans in the post-apocalyptic, racialised United States and following the patriarchal ordering of the trilogy, in *Reloaded* the Architect describes himself as the father of the Matrix and the Oracle as the mother of the Matrix.

The Matrix's 1999 offers a white fantasy of an homogeneous, white (and middle-class) American society. The exceptions are the Oracle (Gloria Foster, and Mary Alice in *Revolutions*) and her helper, Seraph, played by Taiwanese actor Sing Ngai aka Collin Chou. Both these characters are programs, part of the Matrix itself rather than human inhabitants of the Matrix. Dealing in stereotypes, the Oracle's blackness connotes her "primitiveness," her non-scientific abilities. Similarly, Seraph's Chineseness suggests the mysteriousness of the Oracle and of the Potentials, the children who come to see the Oracle who have abilities that enable them to bend the rules that govern the functioning of the Matrix. We also see Rama-Kandra with his wife, Kamala, and daughter, Sati. Rama-Kandra is in charge of the recycling at the power-plant, that is, this program has one of the most menial and disgusting, but important, jobs, that of ordering the feeding of the liquified dead humans to the live humans still in the battery pods.[15] Kamala is

[15] With the spread of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s it became common knowledge that factory-farmed sheep and cattle were being fed meat and bone meal from the residue of other sheep

an "interactive software programmer," a job that might appear to be highly creative, as Rama-Kandra suggests his wife is, but is really just the sort of labour that present-day companies outsource to the Indian subcontinent. In other words, while the humans that live mentally in the Matrix are all white, the labour (the programs) that keeps the Matrix running is suggested to be non-white.

As it happens, the people in the dome in *Logan's Run* are also all white. Another way of thinking about this, then, using our understanding of the utopian total environment in *Logan's Run*, is that the desirable, sexy, commodified world of the postmodern simulation, the Matrix's *jouissance*-filled 1999, is a white world supported and protected by the digital order but under threat from the under-developed third world, shown in the bodies of the very many non-white Zionites. From this point of view, when Cypher makes his deal to return to his battery pod, what he really wants is to return to his own, to middle-class, white America. He has lived in the third world of Zion for nine years and now wants his steak and red wine back. In this reading, Zion, which earlier I suggested functions for readers as the United States, can be read as still the United States but now the apocalyptic multi-racial United States which threatens the white American simulation of 1999 – here we have, perhaps, the key site for the narratival ambivalence that runs through the trilogy.

Why then, have I been placing the first person plural in quotation marks through this article? It is because we need to ask to whom the *Matrix* trilogy appeals, who is this "we" that finds it so fascinating – and remember, here, Baudrillard's comment on the relation of fascination to nihilism in the order of simulation. One possibly unreliable site on the web comments on "the predominantly white Matrix audiences."[16] Given the race breakdown of the films this would be more than likely. In this reading the trilogy are white anxiety films like *There's Something About Mary*, in which the something about Mary, that which the men find so enthralling, is her whiteness. This film was released a year earlier than *The Matrix* in 1998, the same year Buffy started screening.[17] In this reading, the *Matrix* trilogy reassures a white (probably also predominantly male), and in the first instance American,

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and cattle. What distinguishes humans from these animals is that we are not fed, do not feed on, the remnants of other humans. Thus, the idea in the *Matrix* trilogy that liquified humans are fed to the humans in the battery pods reduces those humans to the level of factory-farmed animals.

[16] See http://www.pointlesswasteoftime.com/film/matrix50.html.

[17] I discuss the white anxiety in *There's Something About Mary* in *Coming Out Jewish* (2000). It is an irony of the film that Mary is played by Cameron Diaz, the daughter of a second generation Cuban-American father and an Anglo-German mother.

audience that the apocalyptic racial transformation of the United States, and more generally Western society, can at least be halted. At the end of *Revolutions* Neo sacrifices his white, Good self to produce a stalemate – Zion continues to exist, it has not been destroyed by white globalisation in the form of the machines, and the Matrix, in all its whiteness, continues to exist also.

The *Matrix* trilogy is fundamentally ambivalent in its attitudes. In this essay I have explored some of the reasons for this ambivalence. If the world of the Matrix is artificial it is, nevertheless, offered as better than the world of the viewers. If Zion can be read as the United States, it is also, for white Americans, a scary America dominated by non-whites. The apocalyptic moment, figured on the Holocaust, can be read as both the past transformation of (American) society from modern to postmodern, from progress and certainty to stasis and uncertainty, and the present and future transformation of the United States to a country where whites no longer dominate. After the nihilistic fascination with the textual interpretative possibilities, the popularity of the trilogy is a consequence of its expression of white American anxieties in all their ambiguous complexity. Indeed, that preoccupation with textual interpretation suggests the (almost) pathological need for distraction from the traumatic reality which the films approach.

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REVOLUTION IN *THE MATRIX*: A CUE CALL FOR REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY[*]

KIMBERLY BARTON

Abstract

"Matrix" is the Latin word for "womb," a casing, tissue or structure in which something originates and develops. In the movie *The Matrix* it takes the form of an "iron-clad" structure that molds and regulates all spheres of human life. At the metaphorical level, the Matrix most closely resembles the media, and, insofar as the media is the site at which the filmmakers envision social change, the media may well be the conceptual womb of revolution. The Wachowski brothers not only intimate that the television and motion picture media are the focus of their critique, but also suggest that the cultural norms and values projected by visual media can be re-envisioned on the screen to reflect the embrace of more inclusive and rational norms and values by democratic publics.

Current reality shows and science fiction movies reflect sociology's growing influence on the television and motion picture industry. However, the traditionally modern demand for objectivity in the social sciences deters further immersion in the aesthetic experience of visuality that would open the discipline to influence by the film medium as another venue of publicly-mediated communication. Sociologists today are more likely to assess the impact of ocular culture on learning patterns, than consciously endeavor to learn from images projected on the movie screen. The *Matrix* film trilogy communicates the insight into social theory needed to prompt the sociologist into the subjective, cathartic experience of its symbolic content. One can easily read the imprints of works by Marx, Weber, Baudrillard, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan and others between the lines and pictural images of this monumental oeuvre. Like the portrait whose eyes follow its observer at every turn, this production transcends the deluge of science fiction offshoots of *Star Wars* that encourage audience escape into the mundane experience of

[*] Special thanks to Harry F. Dahms, Lawrence Hazelrigg and Alexandria Sutherland.

the everyday in an unfamiliar garb. It attains the depth of focus to draw viewers into critical reflection not only on the global dimensions of socio-political conflict, but also on the politically hegemonic effect of the entertainment industry on undiscerning mass audiences. The production acts as a mirror for viewers to reflect on themselves both critically, as individual and collective constituents of a hyper-alienated culture that thrives in the imaginary space of the motion picture, and in the light of the filmmakers' unstinting faith in human potential. And as this essay reveals, the trilogy illuminates new, aesthetically rational insights on social science and the normative fabric in which science as a social endeavor is embedded. The objective of this analysis of *The Matrix* is to shed light on the possibilities for diminishing the tension between linguistic communication and ocularcentrism that is inherent in the traditionally modern public sphere, by cultivating visual media that enliven the human capacity for thought and deliberation.

Radically Modern Resistence to the Postmodern Condition

"Matrix" is the Latin word for "womb," a casing, tissue or structure in which something originates and develops. In the movie, the Matrix takes the form of an "iron-clad" structure that molds and regulates all spheres of human life. At the metaphorical level, the Matrix most closely resembles the media, and, insofar as the media is the site at which the filmmakers envision social change, the media may well be the conceptual womb of revolution. The Wachowski brothers not only intimate that the television and motion picture media are the focus of their critique, but also suggest that the cultural norms and values projected by visual media can be re-envisioned on the screen to reflect the embrace of more inclusive and rational norms and values by democratic publics.

As the quintessential question, "what is the Matrix?," is answered in the first part of the trilogy, the actors are transported into a visual field much like a television set in which their appearance and surroundings are reconfigured in simulated form. The Matrix, we are told, "is all around us, even now in this very room. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." This techno-ideological world resembles everyday life as it is fabricated in the 1998 Peter Weir film, *The Truman Show*. However, in the science fiction context of *The Matrix*, where the synthetic world has been constructed to conceal and transport from the "real world" that was decimated by war, the state of alienation is totalizing to

a degree that loses any humorous aspect. The world depicted is ocularcentric in nature; it is a world comprised of images that confine the general public, who remain unaware that their bodily form and sensuousness has been transformed into an object of exploitation in the exchange between man and machine. As the story goes, the real, sensuous form of the human body has been imprisoned in individual incubators in which they passively emit the power that sustains and regenerates the Matrix. The human imagination has been harnessed in its ontogenetically undeveloped state and revamped as the unconsciously indoctrinating dream world that is consumed in a vacuum. As the products comprising this domain accumulate, the reflexive capacity of the human eye and its sensuous vessel becomes integral to an automatic process of total assimilation. Each vacuous body operates in a uniform manner, unencumbered by the distinguishing features of human variation and subjective agency upon which the phylogenetic development of the human species depends. Harnessed within the Matrix, "reflexivity" reduces to the physiological reflex in the absence of a self with the capacity for conscious deliberation. The mind is subject to control by a complex network of computer programs, including well-disguised robotic forms.

The film's depiction of the human condition can best be described in Marxian terms as one of alienation. Erich Fromm described the psychological features of alienation that are most closely associated with life in the Matrix as follows:

> By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become... estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts, but his acts and their consequences have become his masters... [He] is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, is experienced as things are experienced with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively. (Fromm, quoted in Dahms et al., 1973: 19-21.)

Fromm's interpretation of alienation is congruous with the Wachowski brothers depiction of the human condition. This interpretation, however, reflects only a grasp of alienation that we consciously experience in the awareness that we are merely the products of our master's creativity. It circumnavigates the more thoroughgoing critical analysis of alienation in its most pernicious form as a state wholly unrecognized by those captives of desire who are in its grip. Although a clear-sighted view of the distinct manifestations of alienation can be gleaned from the trilogy as a whole, the Wachowskis are intent enough on making a buck to coddle their public with a utopian rather than a dystopian interpretation of the preponderance of the

lowly, hedonistic form of alienation in society. *The Matrix* enlists its audience in the revolutionary unshackling of contemporary culture from its bondage to the entertainment industry as it draws movie goers into the cathartic experience of self-liberation from the technologically engineered synapses of the managed "self." In a similar vein, the filmmakers enlarge on the meaning of the Matrix in the light of a counter image – "the desert of the real" – building on the concepts at play in Jean Baudrillard's most social theoretical text, *Simulacra and Simulacrum* (1995). Although the book appears on screen as an indication that Baudrillard's critique of the media age has influenced the filmmakers, the Wachowski Brothers are not persuaded by his pessimistic association of the rise of mass society with the demise of the social impulse in a culture that is irreducibly hyperreal.

Indeed, the message conveyed by the Matrix runs counter to this postmodern view that the access to the "real," objective domain of products and production has been wholly vanquished by consumer culture, and that the potential for critique has been lost with this grounding. However fragmented the form may be, the social is resurgent in the *Matrix*. The trilogy builds a radically modern counter-image of the human capacity to act autonomously as agents of social change. The Matrix system is not sufficiently closed to prevent the growth of an underground resistance that will eventually establish the relative independence of human from an army of machines. This movement is sustained by a coterie of fragmented peoples seeking mind/body unity who are engaged in the struggle to free others, such as Thomas Anderson, a computer hacker with the alias Neo who, it is believed, may be "the One" who will lead the revolution. The filmmaker's image of "desert of the real," as an unstable environment unamenable to change, may reflect postmodern conditions, but it is only a gateway to the subterranean community. The fragments of homegrown sociality constituting this culture transcend as they reconcile the contradictions of traditionally modern society. The identity of this community is not postmodern: it appears more a reflection of the Baroque culture of the seventeenth century. In borrowing from Bryan Turner's interpretation of the similarities between postmodern and Baroque culture in the context of a defense of sociology which reveals inconsistencies in the modern/postmodern periodization, the identity of the Zion community appears to reflect more of the Baroque than of postmodern culture. As Turner describes, the Baroque "had a strong sense of the fragmented and constructed nature of the social, which developed an articulate notion of the anxiety and subjectivity of the self" (Turner, 1993: 83). In addition to these characteristics, the resistance community in *The Matrix* reinvigorates fragments of the political dimension of the social in a way that reinforces its radically modern as opposed to postmodern identity.

In so doing, the Wachowski Brothers not only deflect the kind of disapproval from within the entertainment industry that an unequivocal embrace of Baudrillard's pessimism about mass culture would invite, they also practically innovate on the ideal of a mediatized public culture as an approach to decalcifying mass culture from within. Eschewing cynicism and despair, The *Matrix* trilogy invigorates the consciously alienated to produce change on the media cultural terrain, irrespective of the majority who have chosen entertainment unto death.

In *The Matrix Reloaded*, viewers are drawn into the familial norms, customs and ritualistic cultural behaviors that add to the stability of the underground community. This part of the trilogy lays strong thematic emphasis on Zion and its collective effort to integrate and educate Neo. As the Wachowski Brothers structure and reinforce the contrast between the Matrix and the resistance, they delineate the terrain of conflict between the politically hegemonic system of control and the new cultural hegemony gaining strength in Zion. The emerging contrast suggests that, whether conscious or not, the directors' approach to political culture parallels the work of Antonio Gramsci, whose early twentieth-century reflections distinguish between the relative weights of consent and coercion in equations for the political hegemony of a repressive state, on the one hand, and the progressive form of cultural hegemony that is embedded in democratic social movements, on the other. An unorthodox collection of traditions bind the community of Zion, which appears to rely heavily on express consent to legitimate itself as a democratic order. The work presents a sharp contrast between the deliberative practices of this community's democratic councils and the systems of cooptation and coercion that curtail human agency and insure conformity in the Matrix. The former is the culture in which Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectuals," who are the creation of a nurturing community that educates them, arise and assume revolutionary roles.

Combining political sermons and spiritual dancing with an emphasis on sensuous movement between the plural racial and cultural elements, the Wachowski brothers give the community its Baroque feel. Their hero, Neo, emerges out of this romantic nexus as a self-possessed leader who speaks the language of his community. The culmination of his maturation from an estranged worker in the computer software industry into "the One" enlightened leader who has attained the practical wisdom to penetrate and instill human control of the cybernetic system of the Matrix, is the end product of a dialectical process, rather than a mysterious transfiguration. The cultural context out of which "the One" emerges is a reflection of the distance the Wachowski Brothers take both from religious orthodoxy and the insight Jean Baudrillard offered on the degree to which solidarity has been

forsaken by desire in highly complex societies. In depicting "Mr. Reagan," the villainous traitor who informs on Zion, as an exceptional figure, as deviant from moral norms that are binding for the community, insofar as his desire for desire pervades, the filmmakers skew the audience's perspective on the extent of alienation in reality. However much the idealism they project is geared toward insuring a captive audience, it is a foil to Baudrillard's gravity, in which solidarity is pronounced as a loosely interconnected yoke reinforcing values that inspire sacrifice, asceticism, loyalty and commitment to more "fully human" ends. This solidarist element counters the effect of fragmentation as a degenerative process ongoing in postmodern society. It accentuates the Baroque features of the Zion community as a revolutionary community, rebounding from postmodern condition in its effort to reconcile the contradictions of modernity in a broader unity.

The Matrix's potentially problematic want of realism is consequential in this analysis – raising the question as to what venues for self-reflexive critique by the public it creates. It thus must be returned to for an assessment in terms of both the distinction between a self-reflexive public and the reflexive viewer, and the quest of just how "captive" Matrix viewers are meant to be.

Revolution in Science and Technology

The idea of a revolution in science and the emergence of research programs in which the traditionally modern yields to reflexive perspectives on technological innovation is a theme that is almost as strongly underscored in *The Matrix Revolutions* as the need for political revolution. The production is itself revolutionary insofar as together with *The Matrix Reloaded* it is the first Hollywood motion pictures created for IMAX film technology. When shown in the IMAX theater, the distance between the disembodied eye of the viewer and the screen is bridged more fully than ever before. The enlarged, sharper image resembles a concave mirror that surrounds the audience. Unlike the flat, window-like surface of the traditional screen, the IMAX screen reflects back on the round eye, drawing in the viewers. In this way a new rudimentary form of reflexivity enters into the process of viewing film itself.[1] *The Matrix*

[1] This innovation makes it possible to maintain the three-dimensionality of space on the "curved rather than planar space" on the screen. The perspective thus produced might be described as a synthetic perspective. By retaining the quality of three-dimensionality it restores the possibility of normal binocular vision which involves dynamic movement or jumps from focal point to focal point, instead of the artificially fixed gaze of one eye. This innovation opens up a new context in which we can more

Revolutions not only upgraded spatial dimensions of the visual field, it brought people together as conscious participants by temporally synchronizing the opening show time, worldwide, to create a sense of solidarity between the viewers who choose to take in a film titled "Revolutions." The directors also reinforce viewer sensitivity to sound by accentuating the significance of interactive audio exchanges between actors who alternate as speakers and listeners. They portray telephone communication as a venue for emancipation that physically transports the resisters in and out of the Matrix. The unmediated exchange on the telephone generates the illusion of bi-directional communication between the Matrix as the technologically engineered site of the visual media and the real world in which the dissenters live. In the closing scene of *The Matrix* Neo communicates his opposition to the ocularcentric system in a phone call directly to the Matrix designers:

> I know you're out there. I can feel you now. I know that you're afraid. You're afraid of us. You're afraid of change. I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I cam here to tell you how it's going to begin. I'm going to hang up this phone and then I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. I'm going to show them a world without you, a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world where anything it possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.

Together, the drama and technological innovations are introduced in *The Matrix* to give viewers the feeling of engagement, rather than passive absorption as captives in a totally ocularcentric experience. Although it would be pretentious to claim that any actual "participatory democratic" dimension of the motion picture could be the offshoot of innovation in *The Matrix*, an important aim of the film is to awaken the inner voice and critical capacity of audiences. It is an inspiration to viewers who are willing to cultivate the art of deliberation as an individual process of democratic decision making that can be stimulated by the symbolic mediated forms of communication we find in the information media.

There is much room for ambivalence about the ocularcentric features of the Matrix and the visual media in general. It sensitizes us to the idea that by privileging vision we may deafen ears and mute voices, thereby closing off avenues for democratic will formation. However, it would be

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easily reconceive monocularity, doing away with the tendency to construe the singular point of view as transcendental or universal, to arrive at a relativist alternative to Cartesian perspectivalism (cf. Jay, 1993a: 116-119).

counterintuitive for filmmakers to lapse into the ocularphobia that has become prevalent in some currents of philosophy. Some clarification is needed to differentiate these critical standpoints. The theme of ocularcentricity is more enduring than the problem posed by the current pictorial turn from print to visual media. The tendency to privilege sight as the sense that gives us access to the truth runs throughout Western thought and dates back to classical times. We can counterpose two epistemological variants of this tendency. The first is the Platonic idea of the mind's eye as the inner space in which we recollect the form of the idea, the true image of the Good that is already in our minds. The second is the Cartesian position that "the mind is visually constituted" by the dominant sense of sight which apprehends external appearances in the form of representations. Things are grasped, "objectively" at given points in time without envisioning or interpreting the inner context in which they appear. Both set up a dualistic contrast between the image in our minds and our bodily experience of things. Descartes, however, constructs opposing concepts of imagination and perception: the former arises from illusory observation while the latter refers to the sensory projection of a natural geometry onto objects (empirical vision), bringing the object into the scientific scope of the reasoning mind. Cartesian perspectivalism is the modern form of ocularcentrism. It generates a novel "spectatorial distance" between the viewing subject and the object brought into the scope of its vision (Jay, 1993b: 145). This distance is an effect of the Cartesian "cogito," the "thinking subject" which monopolizes subjectivity, draining away the subjecthood from other existing "things" which, beginning with Descartes, came to be seen in terms of a new concept of the object. "The word 'object'", in turn, came "to denote all those entities that were not mind" (Solomon, 1998: 30).

The particular inner qualities of things disappear as they are brought into the scope of the Cartesian gaze. Given the abstraction of the subjective dimension of things, the resulting perspective is "inflexible, unmoving, rigid, ego-logical and exclusionary" (Jay, 1993b: 148). This rendering of vision as a singular, monocular perspective has given credence to the ocularphobic elements in Heideggerian, Sartrian and Derridean philosophy. With the construction of this purposive method of observing objects, Plato's ocularcentric conception of the mind's eye became obsolete. The rigidity of Cartesian dualism is evident in its effect of reducing the Platonic distinction between the ideal and real to that between mind and matter, mind and body, and finally subject and object – obfuscating the subjective element of the latter term in each instance.

"The mind" in modernity is no longer regarded as the locus of pure, absolute knowledge and enlightenment. Still, the directors of *The Matrix*

reach back into the classical context to recover the lost subject and the understanding that the gaze includes multiple angles of focus that are more or less specific and inclusive.[2] The value of Plato's allegory for sociology is evinced by Max Weber who referred to this imagery in an effort to show how the disappearance of the subject has effected the terrain of modern science. In a critique of early twentieth-century trends in social science, Weber wrote: "the intellectual constructions of science constitute an unreal realm of artificial abstractions, which with their boney hands seek to grasp the blood-and-the-sap of true life without ever catching up with it" (Weber, 1976: 141). Although Weber was not so captivated by myth as to reconstruct the more subtle interplay of allusion to light and darkness and the barriers to enlightenment (cf. Blumenberg, in Levin, : 30-62), his synopsis of the cave allegory points toward the parallels we find in *The Matrix* storyline:

> Those enchained cavemen whose faces are turned toward the stone wall before them. Behind them lies the source of the light which they cannot see. They are concerned only with the shadowy images that this light throws upon the wall, and they seek to fathom their interrelations. Finally one of them succeeds in shattering his fetters, turns around, and sees the sun. Blinded, he gropes about and stammers of what he saw. The others say he is raving. But gradually he learns to behold the light, and then his task is to descend to the cavemen and to lead them to the light. He is the philosopher; the sun, however, is the truth of science which alone seizes not upon illusions and shadows but upon the true being. (Weber, 1976: 140)

About midway into the first of the *Matrix* movies the screen unveils the real conditions of human existence. The image is of a power plant housing towers of edifices that enmesh the individuated bodies in tubes, linking together the womb-like capsules in which they are imprisoned. Their mimetic relation to the "enchained cavemen" who are captivated by the illusion on the screen in front them is obvious. A good part of the story line in *The Matrix* can be summarized in terms of this allegory as Neo's heroic struggle for the knowledge to free himself and society from illusion. The classical social theorist of modernity, Max Weber, did not take up the theme of body/mind dualism suggested by images: it is yet another angle orienting contemporary critics of Cartesian perspectivalism. His concern was with the power of illusion generated by modern scientists who remain ideologically wedded to empiricist epistemology, and with their descent into a world of hypothesis to construct abstract models which, in turn, make the light of the

[2] Jay (1993b: 148) refers here to the features of what David Levin identifies as the "aletheic gaze" and further distinguishes from the "assertoric gaze."

actual world repugnant. A parallel critique of science in the age of Enlightenment is projected in *The Matrix* in the character known as "the Architect" of the Matrix, who refers to his design as "a harmony of mathematical precision." The Wachowski brothers rely on this character, whose language suggests comparison to Sir Isaac Newton, to ironize the mechanistic worldview and contemptuousness of traditionally modern natural scientists.

Weber's critical perspective on the demise of the subject and modern science's incapacity to embrace the actual world in its sensuous form is stated in more exacting terms by E. A. Burtt, in his path-breaking work on the mathematization of physics under the aegis of Isaac Newton. Burtt offered a new critical vantage point on Newton's theory of absolute motion, which erroneously implied "infinite room for movement." The axioms and definitions comprising his mathematical model of the universe were predicated on the idea of boundless space, which he regarded as the ultimate metaphysical foundation (cf. Burtt, 1964: 254). His theory of absolute motion was similarly legitimated along religious lines, as a truism that followed directly the "infinite scene of divine knowledge and control" (Newton, cited in Burtt, 1964: 258). Since this realm of infinite, boundless space remains unknowable, its movements defy human prediction. From the Newtonian perspective it reflects the chaotic appearance of "the real," which scientists juxtapose to the harmony of the mathematical model of the physical universe. *The Matrix* replicates this experience of nature or "the actual" as disarray and "the hypothetical" as order in the natural sciences, by characterizing the designer of the Matrix as the Architect of a perfectly ordered social sphere. As the Architect informs Neo:

> Your life is the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix. You are the eventuality of an anomaly, which, despite my sincerest efforts, I have been unable to eliminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical precision. While it remains a burden assiduously avoided, it is not unexpected, and thus not beyond a measure of control. Which has led you, inexorably, here.

On The Reflexive Modernization of Social Science

The role of the Oracle in *The Matrix* is instructive for sociologists who address questions of media-related cultural policy. The relation between the Oracle and the Architect is comparable to that between the concepts of reflexive and primary scientization Ulrich Beck delineated in *Risk Society* (1986). The Oracle's faith in the progress of techno-scientific civilization within the Matrix is broken and she is its rationally minded critic. I interpret her objectives, in contrast to the aims of the Architect, as those of the human scientist who identifies and problematizes the risks associated with techno-scientific development in the matrixized world of the media. Viewers learn about the Oracle's role in the creation of the Matrix during Neo's enlightening conversation with the Architect:

> The first Matrix I designed was quite naturally perfect, it was a work of art – flawless, sublime. A triumph equaled only by its monumental failure. The inevitability of its doom is apparent to me now as a consequence of the imperfection inherent in every human being. Thus, I redesigned it based on your history – to more accurately reflect the varying grotesqueries of your nature. However, I was again frustrated by failure. I have since come to understand that the answer eluded me because it required a lesser mind, or perhaps a mind less bound by the parameters of perfection. Thus the answer was stumbled upon by another – an intuitive program, initially created to investigate certain aspects of the human psyche. If I am the father of the Matrix, she would undoubtedly be its mother.

Unlike the Architect whose aim is to reconstruct nature, the Oracle must alter nature: she must reconfigure the Matrix by introducing human elements that admit variance, with the knowledge that her actions will have longstanding effects on the social parameters of the Matrix. The Oracle has the prescience to engage in prophesy, knowing that in foretelling the future she will also influence the outcome. This dimension of her character is revealed in her first encounter with Neo, in which she warns him not to be concerned when he knocks over the vase beside him, and then, in response to his question, "How did you know?" adds the conundrum, "What's really going to bake your noodle later on is, would you still have broken it if I hadn't said anything." Although on first introduction the Oracle looks like a granny at home in her kitchen, her simple yet profound words reveal the invisible spirit of a highly reflexive actor who encourages Neo to share her consciousness of the risks and consequences attending agency. When the Architect refers to her as "the mother of the Matrix" Neo instantly realizes the Oracle is the mother, she is the voice of wisdom who has been mythically

deified by the Zion movement. In this disenchanting moment of enlightenment his trust in her is put to the test. The disjunction between her look and her message is exposed and its detraditionalizing effect is unleashed as Neo realizes that the prophesy he has learned to associate her with is a myth.

The communicative resonance of this and other cinematic moments featuring the Oracle is not strictly visual or auditory. Its transformative effect derives from the tension the film generates by dislocating the feminine bodily image from her prophetic words. The visual guise enhances the resonance of her voice, giving it the power to transcend its particular context. In *The Matrix Revolutions*, her capacity to adopt a new bodily form or "shell" loses its mystery. It merely reinforces her self-stated function as that which "unbalances the equation," or sustains the counter-power effect of the resistance to blind techno-scientific progress. The Oracle may communicate in a language that reflects the loosely connected unorthodox beliefs and religious cultural values of the Zion movement, but she differs from the organic intellectual as "the scientized voice of protest against science."

As the Architect admits, his "infinitely rational mind" proved insufficient as a means of establishing a perfect, total system of control over the variable nature of human beings. He was "doomed" to fail until the Oracle, "another intuitive program"

> stumbled upon a solution whereby nearly 99% of all test subjects accepted the program, as long as they were given a choice, even if they were only aware of the choice at a near unconscious level. While this answer functioned, it was obviously fundamentally flawed, thus creating the otherwise contradictory systemic anomaly, that if left unchecked might threaten the system itself. Ergo those that refused the program, while a minority, if unchecked, would constitute an escalating probability of disaster.

This ironic depiction of the Oracle as a "program" who learns from her mistakes underscores the tension the Architect cannot reconcile between his objectivating perspective, relying on observation and deduction, and her own intuitive grasp of linguistic meaning, to arrive subjectively at a "solution." In turning from his empiricist precepts to recognize intuition and self-reflexivity as subjective wellsprings of knowledge, the Architect has unwittingly reintegrated elements of Platonic idealism into his techno-science. As a program who can shift to another bodily form and who only superficially assumes the social role of psychic or fortune telling, the subjective essence of the Oracle is elusive: it is more inherent in the unique qualities of her voice and communicative capacity, than in her sensuous nature. The Architect loosens up the tensions between his natural scientific construction, and the

cultural-bond, context-dependent knowledge of the Oracle, as he admits the validity of her claim that humans will only accept his model living space or program when given a choice. The Architect's acceptance of the Oracle as his feminine, social scientific counterpart is, in short, symbolic of the beginning of revolutionary advance toward a reflexively modern worldview in which the inner depth or "qualitative" dimensions of the human psyche, persons and things, gain renewed value. This wise and sublime Black woman conveys her depth and vision through a countenance that masks the extent of her distinctive inner life, her difference. She upholds the principle of choice as she lets her spirit shine, thus suggesting the need to reaffirm subjectivity and the classical context of democratic life in which individuals communicated that subjectivity to a deliberating body of visible actors.

The classical ideal of participatory democracy is re-envisioned in *Matrix Revolutions*, as viewers look more closely at the structure of authority, deliberation and decision making in the Zion community. The members of the governing council and military adhere to democratic norms of discourse as they debate procedures under conditions of relative equality. Each representative of a ship is assumed to be an autonomous agent with the capacity to form and express their own opinion. The social organization of life within the resistance approximates the ideal normative conditions required to facilitate conflict resolution in a deliberative democracy. The filmmakers' attempt to re-envision the political structure of the Greek polis in terms of the modern, symbolically mediated public sphere and to encourage the embrace of new, comparatively rational norms and values that constituents who know themselves weigh in the course of deliberation. In so doing, the film begins to dissolve the ideological hold the spectacle has had over its captive audience in one form or another since the Classical Era. Instead of exposing the movie goers to the light and thus wiping away the illusion that has gripped the viewer, metaphorically trapped in the cave, the film begins to dissolve the traditionally modern – and classical – opposition between light and dark, as that between enlightenment and blind ignorance. In this way it opens up the revolutionary possibility of finding a haven of truth within dark recesses of an underground movement that is technologically enhanced. The asymmetry between the visibility of the film and the invisibility of the many viewers cannot, of course, be aesthetically transcended any more than the relationship between the production and the audience could be reconstructed in reciprocal egalitarian terms. However, *The Matrix* stimulates the fantasy we need to conceive of a viewing public as a deliberating assemblage of relatively autonomous individuals who freely interpret what they see on the screen, rather than becoming trapped within the ocularcentric scope of either the traditionally modern gaze or the classical

mind's eye. The Wachowski Brothers certainly achieved the end of generating discussion worldwide about the multi-layered symbolic content and the questions it raises about the relationship between humans and technology, and culture and the visual media.

Self-Reflexivity and Vision: Merleau-Ponty's Perspectiva Naturalis

Both Neo and the Oracle are cast in ironic contrast as archetypes of the intellectual in society. They are figures with whom the viewers can identify as role models. From the Oracle we gain an understanding of the revolutionary way in which perception and voice are intertwined in *The Matrix*. The Oracle is an ethically minded, self-reflexive, rational actor with the ability to know and influence culture from the inside – as an outsider. Her identity construction may be a cue call for sociology to cultivate expertise in media culture and to differentiate, in qualitative terms, between images, symbols, and relations that are socially integrative and culturally democratizing, and those that are exclusive and destructive. From Neo, who is blinded by Agent Smith as *The Matrix Revolutions* draws to a close, we learn that vision emanates out from the living body into the "flesh of the world" beyond it. Neo's vision heightens as he gains the capacity to radiate beyond himself and anticipate the movement of the sentinels.

The significance of vision in *The Matrix* can be more fully understood in terms of Merleau-Ponty's insights about space, in his Marxian philosophy of humanism. Merleau-Ponty critically analyzed Descartes' scientific *perspectiva artificialis* in an attempt to reclaim vision in the actual world of three-dimensional space. Merleau-Ponty approached this task with the contrasting phenomenological orientation he called the *perspectiva naturalis* that freed him from the ocularphobia of his contemporary, Sartre, and other existentialists (cf. Jay, in Levin, 193: 143-185).

In "Eye and Mind," an exposé on science and the art of painting, Merleau-Ponty contrasts the experience of art as "awaken[ing] powers dormant in ordinary vision, a secret of preexistence" like "an inarticulate cry" with Descartes scientistic description of a painting as a two-dimensional plane, an artificial representation, which – like the Matrix – "makes us see in the same way in which we actually see the thing itself, even though the thing is absent. Especially it makes us see a *space* where there is none" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 182, 172). Merleau-Ponty praised Descartes for freeing space from the strictures of empiricism, but criticized the influence he drew on from Renaissance artists who disregarded the angular perspective of the ancients, particularly Euclidian insights into "the spherical visual field" as

they perfected modern methods of projecting depth onto a plane. To lose sight of the angle as the point from which we view, and gain perspective on an object, is to lose sight of our reflexive relation to it. The view from above we get from plane projection is a model perspective, infinite and invariable as a God's eye view that is analogous to Newton's ungrounded conception of absolute space. Cartesian perspectivalism along with Newtonian mechanics, the culmination of the Copernican Revolution, are eclipsed by Einstein's relativity theory, in which space has a reflexive quality because it is an *effect*. No longer the container or vessel it was in Newton, space is directionless, timeless, formless, and dimensionless. Merleau-Ponty's dialectical Marxism similarly advances a reflexively modern worldview in putting forward the self-reflexive understanding that *actual space* is "reckoned starting from me as the zero point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live in it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 178). When understood in reflexively modern terms "freeing space" is a process involving social agents whose vision is unencumbered by the external, surveying power of "the gaze." Free space is created by those who have cultivated the self-reflexivity to communicate their own angle on things in the world and to develop an intersubjectively shared perspective.

As the program Rama-Kandra declares in *Matrix Revolutions*, "what matters is the connection a word implies." It is a necessary bridge between vision and thought yielding from vision. Without the word, visual interaction is just a look upon a look. "Seer and seen are exactly interchangeable." In the movie theater they meet head on, like the deer frozen by the lights of a car. Vision may yield thought, e.g. the ability to experience the "inarticulate cry" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 182) of a painting, but explicit speech is needed to communicate our thoughts on the significance of a film. The relative lack of space in which discursive exchanges within and about film and TV could occur on equal terms, is cause for concern that these media cannot effectively facilitate the democratic ends as spaces for public sphere activity.

Visible Space and Deliberation in the Symbolically Mediated Public Sphere

Reflexive modernists vie with postmodernists on the question of whether the dominance of visual media has a necessarily corrosive effect on the process of public opinion formation, or if technology can be reined in sufficiently to arrest the mass enculturation of public space. Differences in the way the two camps define "radical modernity" and the features of "public space" color this divergence. For Baudrillard, radical modernity is practically synonymous

with the constant barrage of the visual images on the TV screen Americans, above all, uncritically consume. It is the state of hyperreality arising from the destruction of meaning integral to traditional modernity. Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, by contrast, associate the radicalization of modernity with the destruction of traditional appearances in and through the exercise of the post-conventional, critical capacity to weigh the risks and opportunities attending the pursuit of modern ends. It is not the loss, but rather the detraditionalization of meaning that they regard as radical. Where Baudrillard contends that "the real" has decomposed into an incontrovertible world of simulation, reflexive modernists laud radicalization as exposing the pretensions of "positivist-empiricist 'reality'" in which "the real" appears factual in nature. It does not appear from this perspective that the kernel of the real has been lost, but rather that we must recognize the real as that which cannot be symbolized, or "as that which resonates in every symbol" (MacCannell & MacCannell, 1993: 132). Baudrillard's concern with "mass" as it relates to things for which there are copies only, and no original, renders him blind to the insight that "the real" is without copy. We may, for example, either die or be in health. But, when it comes to the former, neither feigning death nor dreams of immortality will alter reality. In *The Media and Modernity*, John Thompson contends with the reflexive knowledge that we live within our "symbolically mediated fantasies." He detraditionalizes the concept of the public sphere, relaxing its dialogical roots to the point that inclusion of artistic media in the forms recognized as facilitating a deliberative process of public as opposed to mass opinion formation is possible. His approach calls for analysis of the production techniques, symbolic content, and additional features which enable democratic self-expression and deliberation in and through the visual media form, recognizing that "the real" in this instance can only appear as the normative ideal "publicness," which we approximate as we would the original, rather than simulate, as we would – more of the same – in the mass.

Thompson introduces the concept of the symbolically mediated public sphere, acknowledging the loss of two of the traditional elements of interaction: "publicness" no longer occurs (1) in a place or (2) between co-present individuals. His new concept shifts our orientation from the tradition of giving a speaker the floor to the idea of creating spaces of visibility where messages are symbolically communicated between non-local, non-present elements of a broader, quasi-interacting public (1995: 344-345). Neither the content of conversation nor the particular individuals engaged are the key determinants of what is deliberated in this space. What is more critical is whether the symbolic content defining the characteristics of the participants is inclusive. Do all potential constituents of the public have the relative

equality of opportunity? Do those engaged in interaction represent the broad mix of ethnic and racial groups which could potentially take part in public deliberation? These concerns about the nature and extent of the space of visibility are expressed in the uncommonly inclusive *Matrix* trilogy, as the opposition between mass culture and democratic public in the film crystallizes. The film serves as an instructive guide in the art of deliberation, providing an archetype of the individual, Neo, who knows himself and can act spontaneously in the public sphere. Neo, in short, is reconstitutive for the public sphere.

Like a ray of light that defies Euclidian geometry in space as it bends and circles back to its point of origin in Einstein's Theory of Relativity, Neo emancipates himself from the Matrix, learns to dodge and then to immobilize bullets, only to give his corporal body back to technology for the purpose of humanizing the mechanized world. Neo knowingly sacrifices his objective, corporal form, reconnecting himself to the Matrix to ensure the destruction of Agent Smith, who embodies technology run wild. Smith's all-consuming narcissism imperils both the machine world and the resistance. Once Neo is connected to the machine world his body changes: he becomes an individual "transmitter" of human influence that is poised to "receive" the program Smith. As a conduit, Neo's individuality is unique: his charisma alone poses a challenge to postmodernist thinkers for whom "the subject is a term in a terminal, lost in the ecstasy of communication" (Baudrillard, quoted in Kellner, 1995: 309). The Wachowski brothers' hero affirms the view that subjectivity as a preserve we can tap. Neo interjects peace into the machine world, lulling the sentinels with his spirit, as the revolution transforms the technological infrastructure and obliterates Agent Smith in the act of absorbing him. In the final moments of the fight between Agent Smith and Neo a choir sings excerpts from the ancient religious treatise, *The Upanishads*.

> In him are woven the sky and the earth and all the regions of the air, and in him rest the mind and all the powers of life. Know him as the ONE and leave aside all other words. He is the bridge to immortality. (*Upanishads*, 1965: 79)

With this victory, Neo is deified. He embodies human perfection that resembles Einstein's cosmological conception of the universe in terms of his theory of "finite infinitude." The Oracle's words – "everything that has a beginning has an end" – reverberate between Smith and Neo, as they meet their objective end. As *things*, in the objective sense only, they are finite. However, the practical reality of Neo's thought in relation to the objective form of technology is not strictly religious contemplation. The truth and the

effect of thought as human sensuous activity proves its reality, as Neo's subjectivity is integrated into the machine world, where it is free to produce lasting qualitative change. The character Neo is a "social product," representing the genius of his people. Enlisting the viewers as witnesses to his maturation into an organic intellectual, the film overcomes what Marx referred to in *Theses on Feuerbach* as the "defect of all hither to existing materialism [...] that the thing [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* [*Objekt*] or contemplation [*Anschauung*]," and not as "practical-critical," activity (Marx, in Marx & Engels, 1958: 403).

This radical understanding of thought as practical activity is integral to reflexive sociology. Practical-critical activity is an underlying element in Alvin Gouldner's specification of the ultimate goal of reflexive sociology as "the deepening of the sociologist's own awareness, of who and what he is, in a specific society at any given time, and of how both his social role and his personal praxis affect his work as a sociologist" (Gouldner, in Lemert, 1993: 470). His orientation is consistent with the perspective on the social scientist I have drawn from the Wachowski Brothers' empathic and intuitive portrayal of the Oracle. The process of sociological inquiry Gouldner describes is one of understanding and hermeneutically interpreting another historico-cultural horizon in the light of a thoroughgoing knowledge of one's own. The interpretive process is one in which we continually reconsider the myths, traditional norms and values embedded in our own horizon, stepping back to view them from the perspective of the other.

In the field of sociology, information, such as data and facts, plays only a supplementary role in relation to knowledge that derives from awareness of self in social reality. Knowledge as such cannot be regarded as value-free; it has an inherently moral dimension. It draws from an array of changing interests and values which enable sociologists to deepen their "awareness of their *place* in the social world rather than simply facilitating their *control* over it" (Gouldner, in Lemert, 1993: 468). The dictum "know thyself" becomes more imperative as one attempts to wrestle with, if not to integrate, the dissonant images, values, illusions and intrigues spawned hourly by the culture industry into the self, and to assess whether media productions contribute to the generation of mass opinion or to that which may be considered distinctly *public* opinion. For the latter to emerge as a recognizable phenomenon, the symbolically mediated material must reinforce the deliberative capacity of its viewers. Moreover, the preserve of the self must be so secure that sociologists can freely take distance from that self Merleau-Ponty particularly associated with vision. Only in this way can we delve into the hostile world represented by the Matrix of the culture industry,

learn about and sift through the discordant stock of new and conflicting value orientations at play, and identify what symbolically mediated material is conducive to publicness. In sociological research within the non-local, transitory realm of the mediatized public sphere, the accent on reflexivity must be doubly underscored.

Reflexivity can work in two directions: it can reinforce subjectivity and the development of relative autonomy, in which case it enriches the practical-critical process of making choices, or it may overload the individual with such a barrage of symbolically mediated materials streaming from conflicting traditions that incorporating social complexity at this level becomes an end in itself. In the former instance individuals may rely on images, roles, characters, and behavioral norms as venues for interaction in new settings. The new values and horizons tend to generate a more reflexive organization of self, and visual media, in turn, make it possible for people to consider alternative lifestyles and value orientations they would not otherwise be able to access. They also make it necessary for individuals to incorporate symbolically mediated materials into the self. Where the *self*-reflexive dimension of reflexivity is insufficiently ingrained, the creative potential John B. Thompson associates with the unavoidable "social process" of incorporating symbolic materials may be lost, and the self-formation may lead to such a superficial, reflexive organization of self that the consumption of these materials becomes an end in itself (Thompson, 1995: 218). In this instance, the possibility of a "relatively autonomous" process of self-formation, and the deliberative capacity that should follow in its stead, is precluded as "the self becomes absorbed" in the pseudo-interactive process of media consumption.

The risk posed by reflexivity that is not self delimited is undeniably hanging in the balance for the *Matrix* trilogy as a media production that looms large on the global market, and strives to widen its margin of success with Neo and Trinity dolls, and other objects of narcissistic identification that were deployed to project a cultic milieu around the movie. It is surely to the Wachowski Brothers' credit that they have convinced their public that the red pill is more courageous, but we cannot escape the reality that the blue pill governs the consciousness of those who would betray the solidarity of the resisters fighting mass enculturation – be they real or fictional. The film experience may tap into and spread the consciousness of the consciously alien. However, it cannot eliminate that consciousness, driven by the desire for desire, which is being regenerated by those – seeking identity through adaptation to the symbolic content and milieu generated by the film – who are not self-reflexive enough to be aware that they are at all alienated or in need of "unplugging." Moreover this consciousness is shared by more than

the singularly mendacious "Mr Reagan" who thwarts the solidarity of the resistance. It is expressive of the mass who, in the absence of self, rely on reflexivity as a mechanical process of simulating character as they are absorbed into mass culture. While this film is "really good noodles," we must remember not only, as Trinity says, "that the Matrix can't tell you who you are," but also that "the Matrix" is only a symbolic representation of "the real" revolution.

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ENTER THE MATRIX – INTERACTIVITY AND THE LOGIC OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM

CHRISTIAN KRUG AND JOACHIM FRENK

Abstract

This essay proposes to look at Atari's *Enter the Matrix*, a computer game that has been billed as "the next evolution of interactive entertainment." Within the textual formations of digital capitalism, gaming has become a pervasive cultural activity, and interactivity has become a vague buzzword of the day, a signifier of new textual practices. Interactivity is a central concept that the film's narrative constantly evokes; Neo is first caught in linear and strictly programmed structures (bourgeois life in the film's narrative, and the narrative of the film itself), and for him to break free from the Matrix means *interacting* with it, i.e. "hacking" it, playing around with its codes and conventions. The game does more than merely toy with this idea – in a conceptual, technological, and ideological sense, it seeks to deliver what the film's utopian but linear vision can only promise. In this sense, *Enter the Matrix* supplements (in a Derridean fashion) the *Matrix* film trilogy, and purports to give access to a world that the film can only show. However, by taking up the logic of the film and its marketing strategies, the game from the beginning fashions itself as a cultural product that claims to disavow all other products – and thus falls prey to the logic of consumption it never seriously seeks to subvert. As we will discuss in this essay, the ideological failures of the game's textual web are inscribed into its interactive structures and its aesthetics.

Jacking in to the Matrix *Franchise*

Within the textual formations of contemporary digital capitalism, gaming has become a pervasive cultural activity. Games, no longer second-rate commercial tie-ins, have become integral parts of a larger cultural matrix in which an artefact's multiple meanings are not limited to one dominant channel any more – the artefact itself is now spread over a whole array of

media. At the same time, interactivity has become a vague buzzword of the day, a signifier of new textual practices, and without the concept of interactivity, the commercial and textual matrix that is the *Matrix* would not be possible. Infogrames/Shiny Entertainment's *Enter the Matrix*, the computer game that supplements the *Matrix* trilogy, is a central element of *The Matrix*: according to the directors of the trilogy, Larry and Andy Wachowski, viewers of the films must become players of the computer game, since knowledge of the Matrix cannot be attained without knowing its various textual manifestations, chief among them the game as its most interactive manifestation.

Enter the Matrix was released to coincide with the second installment of the *Matrix* trilogy in 2003. The game takes up and develops minor characters from an animated short film, "Final Flight of the Osiris," which was also released as an appetizer prior to the start of *Matrix Reloaded*, which in turn uses these characters in its story line. The symbiotic relationship between computer game, feature films and the animated short film illustrates in which direction the interrelations of digital products are changing at the moment. The computer game is no longer merely a "movie tie-in," it has become an integral part of a "Matrix franchise:" a web of culturally and commercially interconnected products which feed off the *Matrix* myth and the *Matrix* industry. So far, the franchise comprises the three films (1999–2003), the films' DVDs (1999–2004), the computer game (2003), *The Matrix Comics* (2003ff.), a collection of animes, *The Animatrix* (2003), and a multiplayer platform on the internet (*The Matrix Online*, launched in January 2005). Consuming either (or all) of these products has been described by the editors of a recently published anthology as "jacking in to the *Matrix* franchise" (Doty & Kapell, 2004). The metaphor, of course, alludes to the way the characters are physically connected to the Matrix, via a jack that is directly inserted into a plug in their cervical vertebrae.

The franchise is different from earlier attempts of capitalizing on successful films by merchandizing campaigns, a strategy usually said to begin on a large scale with George Lucas's *Star Wars*. As Matthew Kapell, one of the editors of the anthology, notes, the plethora of merchandize that the success of *Star Wars* spawned was indeed unprecedented – but it was so only in quantitative terms. With the *Matrix* franchise, a change in quality occurred; "now, rather than just producing products that let the buyer relive the filmed experience, the *products themselves* have become part of the story" (in Doty & Kapell, 2004: 184). *Enter the Matrix* is thus both the product of a marketing endeavour and an essential part in the evolving Matrix myth. It supplements, in a Derridean sense of the word, the *Matrix* trilogy. For example, in *Matrix Revolutions* it is deliberately left open why the Oracle

changes her appearance (the actress originally playing the Oracle died during the editing of the film). The game includes a film sequence that explains the Oracle's change of appearance as the result of an attack by a vicious computer program, the Merovingian, a new character introduced in *Matrix Reloaded*. The *Matrix* myth is thus distributed across an array of media products, resulting in what New Media scholar Henry Jenkins (taking his cue from the trilogy's producer Joel Silver) has called "transmedia storytelling": "In one of the flashier examples of transmedia storytelling, an urgent message gets introduced in 'The [Final] Flight of the Osiris' (anime) and left at a post office, where the player retrieves it in *Enter the Matrix* (game), and the impact of its contents are made clear in the opening scenes of *Reloaded* (feature film)" (cf. Jenkins, n.d.; Silver is quoted in Martig, 2003).

While we believe that Kapell and other scholars have touched on a crucial aspect in their description of the *Matrix* franchise, we would argue that the outstanding feature of the franchise is situated on a different level. The franchise is not remarkable because supplementary texts now elaborate on or even modify the story of a successful pretext – after all, Hollywood has made films out of successful comic books and has expanded on the myths that inform these pre-texts (*Superman*, *Batman*). Rather, the radically new potential of the *Matrix* franchise derives from the status of the various media involved in the process. An established hierarchy is turned upside down since comics, animated short films, and even a computer game now supplement film, a medium that has attained far greater cultural prestige. It is one of the foremost tasks of New Media Studies to analyse and discuss the ongoing intricate exchanges and reconfigurations within the media hierarchy, especially the ways in which new digital media interact with the established electronic media. Within the new configuration of the Matrix, the game is a site of intense negotiations between the different media involved, and the film still claims supremacy.

The game consists of three different visual levels. On the basic level of game play, it features traditional polygonal computer graphics. On the second level, there are linear CGI-scenes which the makers of the game have called "cineractives:" polygonal cut-scenes in the visual style of computer games based on motion capture technology (cf. "Making *Enter the Matrix*," 2003). As the name indicates, these sequences are meant to evoke the "interactive" part of the game, but they are in fact "cinematic" – they can only be watched. The inflection of the actors' voices may differ slightly if cineractives are re-played, but the remnant of the term "interactive" in the name "cineractives" refers exclusively to a visual style, not to any performative aspect. The "cineractives," then, are generic hybrids; they largely follow the aesthetics of a videogame, but they confine the player to the role of a viewer. On a third

level there are fully-digitalized film-sequences: *Enter the Matrix* contains one hour of full-motion video; actual cinematic footage never shown in cinemas and produced on the set of *Matrix Reloaded*, featuring the principal actors. The fact that this third level was widely advertised to boost sales of the game shows how the cultural prestige of one medium is used to advertise another; at least in this respect, the game still feeds off the film. When we talk about a Matrix myth being evenly distributed across a whole array of media, we should not forget that this myth consists of multiple levels of "realness," or authenticity: even though *Enter the Matrix* may be said to participate in the "real" Matrix myth, the films remain more authentic still, and one function of the game is to reward successful players with additional glimpses into the "realer than real" filmed sequences – sequences of films, ironically, which insist on the illusory quality of all medialised realities. In the context of these medial negotiations, interactivity is not of primary concern; instead, a non-interactive reference back to the *Matrix* films takes centre stage.

The *Matrix* franchise hierarchically structures its components, and in commercial terms it provides what might be called a powerful *Gesamtkaufwerk* that deserves scholarly attention. A brief look at one of the products involved may help to show how this cultural and commercial Matrix functions. The collection of animes, *The Animatrix,* brings together some of the most influential writers and directors of Japanese anime. They produced a series of nine short films set in the world of the *Matrix*. Four of the films were released free-of-charge on the Internet in the months leading up to the release of *Matrix Reloaded*. The films charted the making of the *Matrix* ("The Second Renaissance Part I and II") and provided the back-story of some of the characters (e.g. "Kid's Story"). The fifth film, "Final Flight of the Osiris," which producer Joel Silver referred to as "The Matrix 1.5" (cf. "The Matrix Unfolds," 2003), was shown theatrically with Lawrence Kasdan's *Dreamcatcher* (2003), another Warner Bros. venture, to allow viewers to learn the setup for *Matrix Reloaded* before the release of that film. The nine short films were then released as *The Animatrix* on DVD in June 2003.

The concept of the Matrix – as a phenomenon encompassing every aspect of reality as "we" perceive it – helps to simplify and to legitimate this new franchise system. It provides a powerful metaphor which can accommodate each and every product, commercial and otherwise, since it posits a mytho-textual universe that is theoretically unlimited. Postmodernism's "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" returns in and from the Matrix universe with a vengeance, a thesis which has been substantiated in a number of political arenas: when for instance Ukrainian-born boxer Vitali Klitschko fought Danny Williams for the WBC heavyweight crown in Las Vegas, on

12 December 2004, he was introduced into the ring by a short, computer-animated video clip that was modeled on the trailers of computer games. The segment was entitled "Klitschko Reloaded" and was subtly designed to make two powerful statements about Klitschko. First, it was an attempt to portray a quiet, stoic, somewhat stiff boxer as an action-figure; one that is hyper-agile and throws punches non-stop – very much like the avatar of a boxing game. The second rationale behind the clip was to make the media projection of a boxer from the former USSR palatable to an American audience. It was only Klitschko's third fight in the States, and the American audience had not yet warmed to a fighter who looked and spoke like the epitome of every Russian spy in Cold War movies. The clip opens with the Matrix's most powerful iconic marker, mutating neon-green letters cascading down a black screen. From this curtain of letters, Klitschko's face slowly emerges. With this sequence of computer-generated images, the clip acknowledges Klitschko's past; he was part of a totalitarian socio-political "Matrix," but he has emerged, metaphorically speaking, from behind its iron curtain and now becomes visible to an American audience as his own man, accepting the ideological victory of the competitive American screen-dream. The rest of the clip is devoted to Klitschko overcoming his past. The trailer continues with a sequence of Klitschko's best punches against former opponents. First, the letters of the Matrix remain visible in the background, but Klitschko gradually manages to shake them off, and in the latter half of the segment, whenever he punches out one of his opponents, he also punches out the cascading letters in the background.

The clip, produced by the Klitschko-brothers' own production company, K2-productions, was a very successful attempt to tap into a central feature of the *Matrix*-myth, which originated in cyberpunk: the notion of the subaltern's resistance to dominating ideologies. According to Morpheus in *Matrix Reloaded*, the feature that unites most of the community of Zion is "an affinity for disobedience" (2003: 8:20 mins.). Fighting against the Matrix is equated with fighting against "the system." The clip uses this cyberpunk ideology to good effect; especially since the actual boxing match that followed the clip was saturated with political symbolism. It occurred at a time when the American public was drawn to the struggle for political power in the Ukraine; a struggle in which thousands of protesters had regularly gathered in the streets of Kiev. A potentially fraudulent general election had just been successfully challenged, and on the very day of the fight, it was confirmed that opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko had been poisoned with dioxin in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate him. Throughout the fight, Klitschko associated himself with the Ukrainian fight against "the [Russian] system." He set the colour of the Ukrainian opposition movement against the

green colour of the *Matrix*'s best-known image: he fought with an orange handkerchief in his trunk, and after his victory, orange confetti rained down from the ceiling as an orange banner was unrolled behind him.

Enter the Matrix is similarly steeped in cyberpunk ideology, but the game's relation to the *Matrix* franchise as a whole is still more complex. This is because in the very process of taking up the logic of the films and attempting to "jack into" it, the game also becomes a cultural product that seems to disavow all other products and thus falls prey to the same logic of consumption it seeks to subvert. Reviewing *Enter the Matrix* in 2003, Charles Martig argued that the cyberpunk ideology clashes with the franchise system:

> The ideal image of the cyberpunk-hero is anyway ironically refracted through the demands of a global marketing strategy of Warner Bros. and Infogrames. […] What happens when cyberpunk serves as entertainment for the online-generation? It becomes a franchising project, a secure source of maximized profits for Warner Bros. and Village Roadshow. […] $135 million box office returns on the first weekend are, however, only the beginning of a calculated transmedial franchising strategy. The fusion of the media also results, via this highly efficient franchising strategy, in a new encoding of the world. What emerges is a neo-myth of popular culture: commercially successful, spectacularly performed, philosophically stimulating and condemned to unending resurrections. (Martig, 2003; our translation)

The Matrix Online (MxO), the latest product in the franchise, illustrates how cyberpunk ideals and commercial strategies overlap and clash. MxO is a multiplayer online game that sells at $49.95 (not including monthly subscriptions for server access and costs for network/phone connections). Customers were able to pre-order the game two months before its scheduled release date. Those who did received three tokens of their commitment to the ongoing saga: the chance to serve as beta-testers, access to the online game three days before it was granted to the general public, and an "advanced-level hyper-jump ability" which allowed their character to "Hyper-Jump from the first day *The Matrix Online* goes live." By participating early in the commercial chain, customers do get an edge in the fictional world of the *Matrix*. MxO thus shows how the ideologically appealing fight *against* the Matrix has long become inseparable from the commercially appealing fight *for the future of* the *Matrix* franchise. The game's producer, William Westwater, aptly remarks that "MxO will be the chance to see the first online game with genuine martial arts where the players determine the future of one of the world's most popular movie franchises. As we like to point out: 'The future of the Matrix is in your hands.'" Westwater's argument nicely

contrasts with Morpheus' claim when he explains the Matrix to Neo: "As long as the Matrix exists, the human race will never be free" (*The Matrix*, 1999: 43:55 mins.). The buyers of MxO are openly asked to perpetuate an interactively domesticated version of the Matrix as a totalitarian apparatus.

Interactivity and the Nostalgia for DOS-Time

Interacting with one's virtual environment is a central topic in all three Matrix films. In *The Matrix* (1999), Neo is first caught in linear and strictly programmed structures: his existence in the Matrix is most notably determined by the daily routines of bourgeois urban life. To break free from the Matrix for him means *to interact* with it, i.e. "hacking" it, playing around with its codes and conventions, a notion taken up and developed in *Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions*. When *Enter the Matrix* was released in 2003, many people believed it would do more than merely toy with this idea – it was expected that an interactive computer game would deliver, in a conceptual, technological, and ideological sense, what the film's utopian but linear vision could merely gesture towards. The game was billed as "the next evolution of interactive entertainment" in commercials, and the chairman and chief executive of Infogrames, Shiny Entertainment's parent company, called it "a revolution in interactive entertainment" (Marriott, 2003). David Perry, President of Shiny Entertainment, argued that there is no way of truly comprehending the Matrix without experiencing the game play: "You know that saying: No-one can tell you what the Matrix is, you have to see it for yourself? Trust me, just watching the movie, you still don't get it" (in *The Ultimate Matrix Collection*, 2004). The implication here is of course that you will get it (or that you are at least far closer to getting it) if you play and, as a precondition, buy, *Enter the Matrix*.

Similarly, the game's interactivity was occasionally taken for granted by New Media critics. Elizabeth Baker and Timothy Mizelle, for example, evoke it in passing as the cornerstone of their concept of a future "dynamic cinema:"

> The *Matrix* trilogy, alone, could have stood as one of the great groundbreaking cinematic epics of our time. But with the edition of *Enter* [*the Matrix*], *The Animatrix*, and *The Matrix Comics*, the *Matrix* franchise is one step away from what will be a full fusion of these components in future cinema. Dynamic cinema adds the interactivity of *Enter* [*the Matrix*] to the movies; it adds the fusion of animation, comics, and computer animation to the grand special effects of the movies. (In Doty & Kapell, 2004: 165-166)

A closer look at the game reveals, however, that *Enter the Matrix* does not meet these expectations at all – nor, we believe, does it intend to meet them. There are many ways in which a computer game may be said to be interactive. Moving an avatar around in a virtual environment is an inter-act (it means interacting with the game engine), as is choosing not to move around. Once one has entered the world of a computer game, one cannot not interact – one can only break off the process of interaction by ending the game. A basic level of interactivity, mere control, is a fundamental of all computer games; in fact, gaining or keeping control may be said to be the paradigmatic tropes of computer games in general. When *Enter the Matrix* was hailed as an interactive experience of a different kind, though, it was not this basic level of interactivity reviewers were referring to, nor was it what players were hoping for. The hype surrounding the game asked players to expect much more than this. The *Matrix* myth demands that in order to become immersed in the Matrix – in order to become an active participant in it – players need to influence the story line and be able to participate on a narrative level, and this level of interactive choice is not provided. *Enter the Matrix* offers the strictest of linear structures; apart from some very few shortcuts, it lays out a path that players cannot deviate from. Depending on the difficulty level on which the game is played, a green arrow at the top of the screen constantly points players the way; it will turn red if a character turns into the wrong direction. There is only one way.

One of the game's most conspicuous features also serves to highlight the game's lack of interactive potential. *Enter the Matrix* can be played with two different avatars, a male and a female one. The male avatar, Ghost, the first Officer of the "sewage-submarine" Logos, is described as "a weapons man;" the female avatar, Niobe, the captain of the Logos, is an expert at hand-to-hand combat. Much to the disappointment of many fans, the charismatic character of Neo is not a playable game character; this was a conscious decision by the game's designers, who felt that a "practically all-powerful character may not necessarily translate into the most engaging game play" (Marriott, 2003). The player has to choose an avatar at the beginning, and depending on this initial choice of character, some parts of the storyline will differ slightly. The linear nature of the respective plot lines, however, does not change. In effect, the double plot line simply provides the same linear structure twice. (The closeness of the two story lines does, however, allow for a study of the game's gendering, for it highlights the crucial differences of the two.)

The game acknowledges its lack of interactivity in its very first cut-scene and attempts to hide it. Niobe and Ghost are seen in the "white-space" simulation program featured in the first *Matrix* film. Ghost checks his guns:

> *Niobe*: Why do you do that?
> *Ghost*: Do what?
> *Niobe*: Check your guns?
> *Ghost*: You never know.
> *Niobe*: It's a program. They get loaded every time the exact same way.
> *Ghost*: Hume teaches us that no matter how many times you drop a stone and it falls to the floor you never know what will happen the next time you drop it. It might fall to the floor. But then again, it might float to the ceiling. Past experience can never prove the future.
> *Niobe*: So?
> *Ghost*: You never know.
> *Niobe*: Here we go!

Adorned with a philosophical tit-bit, this dialogue makes for a less-than-subtle metafictional reference to computer games (like *Enter the Matrix* itself) which load in exactly the same way every time one sets out to play them. The scene occurs just before Niobe or Ghost will become playable characters; "here we go" refers to players starting to interact with the game. In fact, the game attempts to cover its lack of interactivity here. Ghost is right: the game often loads with subtle differences. When the actors did the voice recordings for the game, they would record some of their lines multiple times, allowing cineractives to play slightly differently each time they reload. These subtle differences are all restricted to the non-interactive cut-scenes, however – the play back may change, but the play remains the same.

A closer look at the interactive features of the game shows that the limited level of interactivity provided by the game takes two familiar forms: advancing the plot line and providing visual gratification. The latter is an important element of interacting with a virtual environment: the visual effects of a player's actions can be aesthetically gratifying (the player presses a complex sequence of buttons and his/her character moves in a visually gratifying way; when he/she shoots, objects collapse in animated sequences and enemies die in elaborate, pseudo-realistic fashion, etc.). Eye-candy of this kind is both a marker and a goal of interactive behaviour, not only in *Enter the Matrix*. The other aspect of interactivity in this game, advancing through the plot line, follows equally basic patterns. If players do not interact "correctly" in key passages of the game (if they do not overcome obstacles), they will either not advance any further (resulting in stasis) or they will "die" – a computer game's favourite metaphor for the "ludic rebirth," for sending a player back to "Go." The game thus exhibits one of the oldest narrative

patterns in computer games. In *Enter the Matrix*, interacting does not change the story line; it merely helps to advance it. One of *The Matrix*'s most famous special-effects inventions, bullet time, is an excellent metaphor for Neo's advancement within and increasing control of the Matrix. *Enter the Matrix* sports a similar device: "focus time." When used, players can slow down the game world, giving them more time to interact correctly. Again, however, the object is to move forward in the game's plot line, which is likewise a purely linear system which the limited interactive features merely help advance.

This intrinsic valuation (or devaluation) of interactivity repeats itself on different levels of the *Matrix* phenomenon. The film-story's ending leaves open the crucial question. It remains unclear at the end of the trilogy's last part what happens to the millions of human beings whom the machines have grown as organic batteries. While the destruction of the world is averted when Neo, the One, destroys the malignant computer virus Smith (and, as a proper saviour, dies in his mission), the basic configuration of illusion-creating machines and dehumanised and exploited humans does not change – and how could it, since the machines are still dependent on the energy produced by the somnambulistic human bodies they are growing? Mankind's future interactivities, it seems, will be restricted to the illusory perpetuation of the Matrix. People will (still) have to play the *Matrix* game according to the rules.

The strictly linear structure and the lack of interactive choice both tie in with some key deliberations made in *Reloaded*, the film that accompanies the game. Choice and determinism are the two poles around which the plot of the film evolves. "Causality," "determinism," "providence," and "fate" are concepts that are evoked time and again by central characters in the movie – in *Reloaded*, characters have a tendency to announce their philosophical and narrative function in clear-cut labels (Councillor Hamann muses about "control;" Morpheus believes in "providence" and "destiny;" the Merovingian believes in "causality;" Agent Smith looks for "purpose," etc.). Only Neo is on a superficial level associated with free choice – usually between binary oppositions (the red pill versus the blue pill at the beginning of part one, the left door versus the right door at the end of part two). In a sense, *Reloaded* does not only have a title that can be read as an allusion to computer games, it also works like a computer game. It has clearly-defined missions, complete with unambiguous mission briefs ("in order to go to the source, you must first locate the keymaker and liberate him from the Merovingian who holds him prisoner;" or: "in order to reach the architect, you must go through a door at a specific building in a limited timeframe, but you must first disable the security system by shutting down a power plant"). On an epistemological level, the film's ending implies that Zion is merely the

next level in the Matrix, a multilevel computer game. Neo finds out that his power to stop the machines by the force of his will extends to the "Desert of the Real." This realization at the end of *Reloaded* has been taken as a hint that he is still "plugged in" and that Zion is yet another instance of a computer Matrix devised by the Architect to keep control over the rebellious few – Neo, and with him the film's audience, has simply advanced one level. As a fan put it in an internet forum, "Was Neo ever human, or did he but become the first avatar in the Matrix game to achieve Artificial Intelligence?"

Indeed, the entire Matrix can be interpreted as the ultimate videogame, a game that takes the gaming community's quasi-mystical dream of "full immersion" to a new level. The films' plot hinges on the fiction that human beings are being forced to enter the Matrix and that they are trapped in blind and pointless interaction with what they mistake for "reality." At the beginning of the first film, the bewildered programmer Thomas A. Anderson (Neo unenlightened), escapes from the Matrix through the help of the prophet-figure Morpheus. Morpheus dismisses Mr. Anderson's idea of reality: "This is the world that you know. The world as it was at the end of the twentieth century. It exists now only as a part of a neuro-interactive simulation that we call the Matrix." From the beginning, the Matrix is an interactive simulation, a videogame, and *Enter the Matrix* thus figures as just another extension of the great game that is the Matrix.

What *is* remarkable about *Enter the Matrix* is not its innovative potential (there is next to none), but the fact that it lovingly collects a host of older games and game types. It offers the gaming experience of a very traditional "look-left,-look-right,-shoot-'em-up-and-then-move-on" *Doom*-type of game, it has sequences which are clearly reminiscent of a *Tomb Raider*-type duck-and-climb adventure game, it contains levels which are of the drive-like-hell-and-clear-the-highway type pure and simple, it sports martial-arts fights of the *Mortal Kombat*-kind, and it ends, in the game's final mission, in a space action game reminiscent of *Wing Commander* and similar games of the late 1980s. All of these elements co-exist in the game, while none of them are in any way remarkable in themselves – and this may well be the point. *Enter the Matrix* is an adult's digitised memory of his juvenile gaming experiences. In fact, if one believes the spin, this might literally be how the game was devised – Shiny Entertainment had involved *The Matrix*'s directors, the Wachowski brothers, into the planning stage of the game. The film's eccentric directors, both avid gamers, offered their own favourite

gaming experiences as role models and even compiled a 244-page equivalent of a shooting script for the game (Marriott, 2003).[1]

We would maintain that *Enter the Matrix* is a retro-game which does not set out to be challenging in new ways; instead, it thrives on nostalgia for vintage computer games. A week before the launch of the computer game, Infogrames Entertainment S.A. (IESA) adopted the brand name "Atari" for its global commercial operations. As a brand name, Atari is still associated with the heyday of classic console and computer games in the 1980s. According to Bruno Bonnell, Chairman and CEO of IESA, the company's change of name purposely coincided with the release of the new game *Enter the Matrix*:

> It's the perfect moment in our history to make this change. Next week we'll be launching *Enter the Matrix*, an extraordinary game which has redefined the Hollywood license, setting a new standard for the convergence of games and films. The "break the mold" approach we took with *Enter the Matrix* exemplifies the very personality Atari has always represented and captures the personality of our Company today, from game development to deal-making to partnerships and so on.[2]

When *Enter the Matrix* was re-released as a budget game in 2004, it was published in the "Best of Atari" series of games. The game's assimilation of a brand name was complete: Atari no longer is a part of the franchise; the franchise effectively claims that it has become part of the brand name.

The company's embrace of an icon of traditional gaming culture is a cultural move that does more than merely correspond to the general makeup of *Enter the Matrix*. Much more than that, the eagerness for the name of a famous gaming company is in many ways indicative of the *Matrix* franchise as a whole. *Matrix Reloaded* shares the logic and the title of computer games, and in terms of its popular culture significations, it was also associated with 1980s Atari gaming culture. This is clearly evidenced by a ten-minute *Matrix* spoof produced for the 2003 MTV Movie Awards which weaves together 1980s computer games, the Wachowski brothers, and the *Matrix* myth. In the short film, the presenters of the MTV Movie Awards, two icons of 2003 popular culture, solo-recording artist Justin Timberlake (and formerly a

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[1] See Knight & McKnight (2002) on *The Matrix* as an example of a mixed-genre film.

[2] *Enter the Matrix* was released under the Atari label but developed by Shiny Entertainment in cooperation with Infogrames, Inc. This company is in turn a majority-owned subsidiary of France-based Infogrames Entertainment SA (IESA), a global publisher and distributor of video games for all platforms (Cf. http://corporate.infogrames.com/ IESA/corp_pressreleases.php?op=story&sid=270).

member of boy band '*N Sync*) and actor Sean William Scott (co-star of *Dude, Where's My Car?* and the *American Pie*-trilogy of films), stumble into some key scenes of *Reloaded* and play alongside the icon and hero of the *Matrix*-universe, Neo. In the last and longest scene of the film, all three are introduced to the architect (played by comedian Will Ferrell), who informs them that he not only created the Matrix, but also the MTV Movie Awards ("a systemic anomaly inherent to the programming of the Matrix"). The architect then tells them that he is "Larry" (Wachowski) – one of the "architects" of the *Matrix* franchise. He adds that he was also the programmer of *Q*bert* and *Dig Dug*, two popular computer games of the early 1980s (both released in 1982), and that he invented the name of the most popular of games ("I didn't create *Frogger* [1981], but I came up with the name for it. Can you believe they wanted to call it Highway Crossing Frog?"). All three games mentioned by the mock architect are classic examples of the Atari era of the 1980s. They were cartridge games for the most successful video game console of the late '70s and early '80s, the Atari VCS (Video Computer System, later called "Atari 2600"). In addition, *Dig Dug* (one of the first arcade games in which players could construct, that is "dig," their own gaming environment) was also the first coin-operated import licensed by Atari (DeMaria & Wilson, 2002: 83). In a complex act of popular-culture-*Verdichtung*, the scene interweaves classic computer gaming, the *Matrix* universe and the MTV awards. Certainly, the spoof is *not* outside the franchise but part of it. It was incorporated into the 2-Disc Special edition of the *Matrix: Reloaded* DVD, published in 2003, and later into *The Ultimate Matrix Collection* of 10 DVDs in 2004 and was thus assimilated by the *Matrix* / franchise.

The MTV spoof demonstrates the importance of 1980s computer games culture as a context for the popular Matrix myth, and it hints at the metafictional fashion in which this context is evoked. The same principle applies, and even more so, to the computer game *Enter the Matrix* itself. The game also refers back to the digital culture of the eighties and nineties in decidedly metafictional fashion. Two examples will illustrate the point. The first is probably the best-known iconic image that has emerged from the *Matrix* franchise: the cascading green letters which keep changing as they are raining down a black background – a monitor or a cinema screen. The image has acquired the status of a metonymic marker, an image which immediately identifies the diverse products of the *Matrix* franchise. It provides the franchise with a sense of corporate identity. This image is powerful because it taps into memories of older, monochrome computer monitors, a nostalgia that the first film (and all subsequent ones) has already used to good effect. It fits in well with the films' general sense of nostalgia. Even though they are

science-fiction films, the *Matrix* films are fundamentally retrospective; both in the utopian visions they offer and in the very basic mythical archetypes they employ (e.g., Neo/the One as a saviour figure; Zion as the quasi sacred city). The black monitor-like background and the superimposed, falling neon-green letters evoke the utopia of the early age of personal computers, a digital age with limitless possibilities and without today's threats of viruses and worms, both of which are constantly given shape in the narrative: in the forms of the omnipresent "virus" Agent Smith, of the electronic spy-worm that penetrates Neo's entrails, and in the form of machines "digging" their way through the bowels of the earth to reach Zion and destroy it.

Enter the Matrix takes up the falling letters on the black background in its menu-structure, in which the image plays a prominent part. In addition, the game itself features a sequence that uses this imagery in a self-conscious, mocking fashion. In the first section of missions, the chosen avatar enters a post-office. Ghost/Niobe needs to retrieve vital information which they must locate in the multitude of parcels and letters that are being processed and sorted in the post office's processing rooms. In one sequence, the chosen character will reach a spacious room where letters are automatically sorted. An explosion damages a central pipeline in the ceiling; the pipeline continues to spit out letters which now fall to the ground. The game takes the metaphor of falling computer letters literally; the mass of letters falling down on Ghost/Niobe visually evokes one of the film's central images – but translates it, in a nostalgic twist, into the good old time of non-digitised information and snail mail.

The second nostalgic element is another of the game's most conspicuous features: an eighties' DOS console. With its monochrome display, its sluggish reaction time and minimal sound effects (i.e. beeps), the console flies in the face of the rest of the game, which boasts stunning visuals and advanced graphics. The DOS console offers a game purportedly outside the game; it offers the DVD-user the possibility to hack the Matrix – within strictly defined limits, of course. The DOS console deserves special attention because it highlights two structural principles of computer games and of new digital entertainment products in general: like many other prominent entertainment products in New Media, the console first of all highlights a digital "surplus"-value; as an "extra feature," it supplements the main product in a new interactive way. Secondly, the metaphor of "hacking" serves to hide the game's lack of interactive potential and constructs a distinctly post-digital vantage point from which the gaming experience is viewed.

Bonus Features and the Aesthetics of Digital "Surplus"-Value

The interactive potential of most commercial computer games is limited. This is especially true for very linear, level- and mission-based single-player games like *Enter the Matrix*: once players have mastered all the moves and have followed the game on its path through the various levels, having accomplished all the missions along the way, the game will simply come to an end – both in narrative and in conceptual terms. Games are designed to provide a minimum amount of game play (usually about ten hours); this is the minimum time it takes a very good player to complete a game (*Enter the Matrix* was designed to provide between fifteen and twenty hours of game play). "Reloading" a game that has been completed usually means revisiting spaces that have already become familiar. This limited amount of game play is at odds with the popular conception of computer games as texts of potentially limitless interactive possibilities, an image that games share with some other new digital texts like DVDs. Both computer games and DVDs have developed conceptual strategies to overcome these technical limitations and have devised rhetorical strategies to hide their limitations and to uphold the fiction of a seemingly limitless interactivity. The offering of a digital "surplus"-value is one strategy exhibited by both digital media. Both games and DVDs are crammed with "specials," "extras," and "bonus" features. The main function of these features is to counter the perception of the media's limitations with a resounding "more!" Moreover, since these extras are often hidden, it takes an extra interactive effort on the part of the player/user to find and use them.

Experienced computer gamers, like experienced DVD-users, expect such hidden features. To be sure, *Enter the Matrix* strives to meet the expectations of the gaming community: extra weapons, special skills, hidden areas are waiting to be found or activated. Paradoxically, hidden features are thus often advertised: on its re-release as a budget game, *Enter the Matrix* sported a sticker on a prominent play of its cover which announced that it now contained "two secret mini-games." Hiding features is a particularly effective strategy which transfers the intrinsic limitations of the digital product from a physical medium to its users. The knowledge that a digital text *might* contain more features, an additional surplus value on top of the "official" extra features, adds to the fiction that the respective text is never completely explored, that it retains some unexplored interactive potential. Responsibility for the interactive consumption of such New Media products has been assigned to its users, who are taught never to think that they have exhausted the possibilities of a text – the stream of ever new digital features is interrupted because of their lack of skill, not because of the text's

limitations. According to the myth of the undetected hidden feature, there will always be more than the player or user has found.

With DVDs in general, the myth of the hidden feature waiting to be found has become an essential component, and hidden features are used expressly to hide the fact that the storage capabilities of a DVD are strictly limited. New Line Home Entertainment's vice president Mike Mulvihill commented that with hidden features, "we want to deliver the impression there's always something deeper for those who want to dig for them, even those who have watched everything that's been documented. [...] There may be that extra material that's waiting for them to find." (cf. Saltzman, 2001). One DVD that was instrumental in changing the cultural and commercial status of "extra features" on DVDs in general was one of the earliest and most successful products of the *Matrix* franchise: Warner Home Entertainment's *The Matrix* (1999), the DVD that accompanied the first film in the trilogy. This DVD of the first film made possible and shaped the use of the console in *Enter the Matrix*, the game that was to follow it four years later.

Warner's *Matrix*-DVD-release in 1999 set new standards for the status of "Special Features" on DVDs: it promoted the fact that DVDs were interactive experiences. This was something new at the time. The makers of DVDs had always felt the need to offer their customers a "surplus value" because at the beginning of its brief technological history, the DVD had to justify its high price when compared with video tapes. In the advertising of DVDs, quantity beat quality by a wide margin; "better" was far less of a sales incentive than the ever-present "more." The ubiquitous "Special Edition"-DVDs have since become a staple feature of the industry, and for some years now, their production has even entered the very process of film making. It is precisely this production process of a DVD that *Enter the Matrix* has transferred to computer games. Additional footage for the game was shot on the film's location, and documentaries are produced exclusively for release on DVD. On many DVDs, the supplemental material still sells for what the name indicates: an extra, a bonus – a feature of the DVD which merely supplements the primary content, the feature film. Extra features are often bundled together in special sections of a DVD; sometimes, they are "secondary" even in the sense that they are relegated to a second disc. The first DVD advertising a new technology weaving together the supplementary content and the film proper was the *Matrix*-DVD. It was revolutionary (or in any case was perceived to be so) because it broke through the traditional boundaries of primary and secondary material – and it did so in a playful, to some extent even in a subversive fashion: the DVD turned its users into virtual rabbit hunters.

By activating a special feature of the menu, little white rabbits are shown in some selected scenes of the movie. By pressing a button (i.e. by "catching the rabbit"), the film is interrupted and nine documentaries offer comments on the production process of the respective scene. After the documentary is finished, the film continues where it left off. The symbol of the white rabbit is of course apt. As a surreal icon, it perfectly fits the exuberance and playfulness of the feature film. The white rabbit is first and foremost a very clear intertextual reference to Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-books, at the beginning of which Alice follows a white rabbit into wonderland. This frame of reference is unambiguously spelled out in the first film: the young IT worker Anderson receives a message when the line "follow the white rabbit" flashes onto his (monochrome) computer screen. By following the "white rabbit" (a tattoo on a woman's shoulder), he finally learns that his everyday reality is merely an illusion, a virtual construct carefully devised and constructed to trick human beings into believing in what is essentially a dream world. The trail of the white rabbit leads him "behind the scenes" of this make-believe world. Morpheus offers Neo the possibility of finding out how deep the rabbit hole actually is, and at the beginning of Neo's awakening from the computer-induced illusion, Neo touches the surface of a mirror, which takes over the surface of his (virtual) body and thus forces him through the looking-glass into the real world. In the film, seeing white rabbits thus mutates from being a conventional sign for a loss of reality to being a helpful sign on the way to reacquire reality – just as Carroll exposed ideological structures of Victorian England in what he labeled "nonsense."

The *Matrix* franchise repeatedly makes use of the *Alice*-books as an intertextual synonym for the duplicitous nature of accepted reality concepts. One of the short films of *The Animatrix*, "A Detective Story," makes elaborate use of the subtext of the *Alice*-books. Ash, the eponymous detective, ordered to find Trinity, first visits one of his colleagues who has gone as mad as a hatter over the same task. The man is lost in a world of *Alice*-allusions: the phrase "find the Red Queen" is painted on the wall of his room, whose floor he has turned into a chessboard, and he likens Trinity to "a jabberwocky." The mad detective ruminates over his shattered *Weltanschauung* by referring to the fantastic reality of the *Alice*-books. Ash then contacts Trinity in an internet-chatroom; their respective synonyms are "White Pawn" and "Red Queen." He meets Trinity in the virtual flesh when he manages to decode her order, "You'll have to jump the first of six brooks," by consulting Carroll's text and thus finding the right metro-train on which Trinity is waiting for him (*The Animatrix*, 2003).

There are other white rabbits than Carroll's in Western popular culture to establish the cultural significance of the symbol in the Matrix. While for

the hero of *Harvey* (1950), played by James Stewart, a white rabbit becomes a symbol for the loss of reality induced (or at least aided) by alcohol, the viewers do actually see the proverbial "white rabbits" – a fitting image for a postmodern film that questions and plays around with concepts of reality, illusion, and paranoia. James Stewart's white rabbit can be said to become, in a paradoxical manner, virtual reality. Additionally, the white rabbit may be interpreted as a symbol of the interactive "hunting instinct" of consumers. The white rabbit is a symbol of the playful strategies by which DVD-menus attempt to lure users into becoming interactive participants. The white rabbit on the *Matrix*-DVD outlives its own banality and becomes a symbol for a conceptual break in the history of DVD design. It marks those instances in the textual web of a DVD where the boundaries between "supplementary," metafictional and "primary" material tend to get blurred. The *Matrix*-DVD was a first successful cornerstone of a new technology that sought to break open the linear structure of feature films, to interweave the contents of a DVD to such an extent that it would provide an interactive experience. This idea would result in a host of technologies introduced in 2000 and 2001, ranging from "seamless branching" on a very basic level to "infinifilm" (New Line Home Entertainment), "Intellimode" (BMG), and "InterXS" (Concorde) on more sophisticated levels.

The intertextual framework of references also transforms the white rabbit into a potent symbol of the dream factory Hollywood. If a DVD user follows the trail of the white rabbit on the DVD, he is granted a privileged look behind the scenes of the production process of the film and learns about the carefully devised and constructed character of the fictional world which a Hollywood film produces. Once set in motion, this train of thought does not stop here. Like all good symbols linking the level of fiction and of metafiction, the white rabbit leads customers into further metafictional realms, since the machinery that grants users this privileged view behind the scenes is the same one that usually hides these views.

A Comfy Illusion of Subversion

There is no escape from the (meta)fictional nets Hollywood has cast, neither for Neo nor for the user of the DVD – and the same applies for *Enter the Matrix*. It adopts a similar technique in a feature which allows the "hacking" of the game and which takes the form of a DOS-console. The DOS-console supplements the game as an "extra feature," allowing players to modify saved games. Again, the fact that the "commands" and "programs" which run on this console are not "real" – they are contained by the game and are parts of

its programmed routines – will not diminish the nostalgic pleasure of playing with it. After all, within a game that plays with the idea of the Matrix as an all-encompassing *ersatz*-reality, a feature that purports to be much more than a game is to be expected.

The DOS-hacking-feature is an "extra feature" in the sense that access to it is only possible from the main menu, not from the game proper. On the conceptual level, this is an important distinction. While loading a new game is visualized as jacking in to the Matrix, using the DOS console metaphorically takes place in the real world, and "hacking" the game by means of the console on one's home monitor or screen is like hacking the Matrix from the computers onboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*. The metaphor not only establishes the console as an extra feature, it constructs it on a different level of fictional "reality." The console seems to hover between the two planes of gaming proper on the one hand and the level of program code (that makes game-play possible) on the other. What is more, instead of as the latest metafictional turn of the postmodern screw, the feature can be read as a loving gesture to 1980s computer games.[3]

The DOS console allows players the "hacking" of the "computer program" and enables them, albeit in very limited fashion, to influence the game. For example, once players have learned about a "program" called "cheat.exe," they gain access to unlimited ammunition, infinite health, or play in a stealth mode that allows their character to be invisible. They can also equip their character with an additional weapon, a sword. The console to a certain extent reaches out into the game proper, which once more blurs the distinction between text and paratext.

In the case of the DOS-hacking feature, the learning of the rules of the game *is* the game. Players have to accumulate knowledge: at the beginning of the hacking process, only two basic commands are given in the lower section of the screen. The rest of the command set has to be gradually made visible (starting with the well-known "dir"-DOS-command) and then "learned." The player has to try several sorts of commands until he/she has found the right commands, i.e., those that will give him/her access to more directories, which in turn yield more commands. When the player has acquired sufficient

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[3] In Muse Software's *RobotWar*, players were also able to use pseudo-code to programme robotic behaviour. The game even prompted an early version of an online platform similar to *The Matrix Online*: in a "play-by-mail tournament" organized by a magazine, *Computer Gaming World*, players sent in disks with their "code" by mail; the editors of the magazine would then pit the robots against each other in tournament matches (cf. DeMaria & Wilson, 2002: 224).

knowledge of the program, he/she can slightly change the game, but (and this is decisive) only in programmed ways – there is no control beyond that which the game's programmers permit. Hence, changing the system "really" is out of the question – and the nostalgic surface is not meant to be taken seriously by gamers. The feature of the DOS-console is a perfect example of a strategy of containment. It offers the playing subject (of course in a mockingly self-conscious fashion) an illusion of subversion which leaves the power structure itself unchanged. This controlled space for subversion provided by the system itself is exactly what the first *Matrix*-film shows at the beginning, when Neo is still the humble programmer Thomas A. Anderson, who works for a big software company. Mr. Anderson's petty violations of the Matrix's laws are tolerated, and they give him the illusion of testing out the system's limits. The nostalgia of the DOS-hacking-feature invites gamers to a trip down memory lane (or on the memory path), but this digital nostalgia ironically overwrites the tame and quite conventional interactive structures employed by a game which was expected to overthrow the Matrix of conventional interactive structures.

The *Matrix* films foreground epistemological conundrums and celebrate ostensible aporias, but behind these aporias there lurk the concept of the real (not Lacan's real, we would argue, but the banality of a commonsensical everyday reality) and some mythical archetypes: a saviour-figure (Neo), a chosen land (Zion). The films playfully set out to deconstruct these archetypes, but they do so with less zest than one would assume, and they remain signifying anchors in the arena of popular culture. It is here that Neo, Morpheus, Trinity, Ghost and Niobe become iconic figures of resistance, acting on an interactive surface that is tightly controlled by the makers of the *Matrix* franchise. As *Enter the Matrix* participates in the making of these iconic figures, it plays around with the ideas of the Matrix for the purpose of the highest possible sales figures. Whether players remain consumers by the very act of buying the game or whether the Matrix still offers meta-room for ideological manoeuvres is a question that remains open for debate – a debate which Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment is certainly interested in keeping alive. *Enter the Matrix*, however, for all the hype around it that seeks to sell it as a neo-myth of interactivity, does not even attempt to come up to the great expectations. Instead, it is just one more part of the *Matrix*-as-product, an all-encompassing franchising innovation that helps to perfect the digitally capitalistic Matrix of the entertainment industry from whose definitions of reality and pleasure there seems to be no escape through the interactive looking-glass of the computer screen.

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Section Two:

Virtualities

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PHILOSOPHY AND *THE MATRIX*

CHRIS FALZON

Abstract

This essay focuses on the first *Matrix* film and its use of theory, and of philosophy in particular. Against the background of increased interest in the philosophical interpretation of film, the discussion looks at some of the ways philosophical themes can be seen to play a role in the film, and at the relationship between film and philosophy more generally. *The Matrix* not only draws explicitly on philosophical themes such as Cartesian scepticism in connection with Neo's imprisonment in the Matrix. It philosophises, drawing the viewer into a process of becoming critical of appearances. In addition it extends this critique to technologically produced forms of artificial reality. But if the Matrix draws on and makes use of philosophical themes, we can also in turn make use of *The Matrix* to illustrate and critically reflect on philosophical themes. In particular, Neo's return to the Matrix illuminates further themes such as the Cartesian (and also Platonic and Christian) desire to "escape the flesh;" which also reappears in contemporary visions of technologically assisted transcendence. This can now become the object of critique, a Nietzschean critique in fact, which in turn has implications for the kind of picture presented in *The Matrix*. Overall, it is argued, there is a complex interplay between *The Matrix* and philosophy.

A striking part of the *Matrix* phenomenon is the way in which it has excited interest in academia and amongst the broader public for its treatment of philosophical themes. There have been conference papers, symposia, journal articles, edited collections (e.g. Irwin, 2002; Yaffeth, 2003) and university courses on philosophy and *The Matrix.* In these treatments, philosophers have noted parallels between *The Matrix* and classic philosophical texts like Plato's *Republic*, especially the allegory of the cave, and Descartes' *Meditations*, especially the dream argument and the evil demon hypothesis (Knight & McKnight, 2002: 189). The film has been said to allude to core issues in metaphysics and epistemology, e.g. appearance versus reality, the

possibility and limits of knowledge, and the relationship between mind and body; as well as moral philosophy, particularly the question of whether we are free, determined or manipulated by external forces. In addition, there are said to be allusions to spiritual and religious notions, from Nietzsche's Overman to apocalyptic Christianity (Knight & McKnight, 2002: 189). Commentators have identified numerous additional themes in *The Matrix* (and the *Matrix* trilogy as a whole) including: the Baudrillardian theme of simulations and simulacra; nihilism, existentialism and authenticity; truth versus happiness (see Felluga, 2003; McMahon, 2002 and Griswold, 2002, respectively); and so on. Against the background of a growing interest in philosophical interpretations of films, and in using film as a resource to enrich philosophical discussions (e.g. Russell, 2002; Rowlands, 2003; Porter, 2003; and Light, 2003), it is useful to return to *The Matrix*, one of the richest sources of philosophical references – to look at some of the ways in which philosophical themes can be seen to play a role in the film, and also to say something about the relationship between film and philosophy more generally.

The Matrix *through Philosophy*

To begin with, are all these themes really to be found in *The Matrix*? Slavoj Žižek calls the film a kind of cinematic ink blot test, "setting in motion the universalised process of recognition" (Žižek, 2002: 240). As one commentator, John Byron, puts it, *The Matrix* seems to configure itself "to meet the endless hermeneutic needs of its manifold audience" (Byron, 2004: 94). One might be tempted to say that as with inkblots, a good deal of this perceived philosophical significance is what the viewer brings to the film, reflecting whatever background or perspective they're coming from. Perhaps this is always true to some extent when we look at films from a philosophical perspective. If for example I see Verhoeven's *Total Recall* as illustrating Locke's memory-based notion of personal identity, or Zimmerman's *High Noon* as presenting us with a Kantian moral individual, there is no suggestion that these films deliberately set out to make any such connection, or even that there have been unspoken philosophical influences upon them. Even so, it would be going too far to say that philosophical significance is simply a matter of an imposed interpretation, just something we bring to the film, as if we could read a film any way we like. We cannot. Some philosophical themes are evoked more readily than others by films, and some readings just don't work at all, which suggests that in identifying philosophical positions and themes in particular films we are not only imposing significance upon

them but also bringing out and amplifying something of what is going on within the films.

To some extent the philosophical significance of *The Matrix* can be viewed in these terms. But the film also points to a further way in which film may invoke or engage with philosophical themes, by deliberately alluding to them, overtly demanding to be read as philosophically significant in certain ways. *The Matrix* is full of this sort of deliberate allusion, and this brings certain philosophical themes to the fore. While the latter part of the film, and indeed the other films of the *Matrix* trilogy, increasingly focus on the theme of the possibility and exercise of choice (and its conflict with predestination and/or manipulation), the earlier part of the film invokes especially the theme of scepticism about knowledge of the external world, and alludes explicitly to Descartes' arguments, and Cartesian-style arguments, in this connection. Scepticism about knowledge is one of the best-known philosophical themes associated with *The Matrix* (cf. for example Erion & Smith, 2002; Bostrom, 2003), generating a large part of its reputation as a "philosophical film," and will provide a useful focus for our discussion. We know the premise of the film: most of humanity has been enslaved by a race of intelligent machines that use human bodies as power sources. The humans however are completely unaware of their real situation. Everything seems normal because a supercomputer feeds them a computer-simulated reality ("the Matrix"). Only a few rebels have managed to escape this enslavement and are able to offer resistance to the machines. Thus at the start of the film, before he escapes from the Matrix, everything the central character, Keanu Reeves' Neo, experiences and takes to be real is in fact a computer-generated illusion.

In the film there are various allusions to Descartes' arguments in the first chapter of the *Meditations*, designed to call into question what we think we know on the basis of what we experience. There is the dream argument, which calls into question beliefs about your immediate circumstances by asking how you can be sure at any point that you are not in fact dreaming; and more radically, for dreams are not perpetual or all-embracing, how do we know that everything we have ever experienced is not in fact being conjured up by some evil demon intent on misleading us? Or in an updated version, suggested by Hilary Putnam, how do we know we are not merely brains floating in a vat, hooked up to electrodes, being fed our experiences by an evil scientist? *The Matrix* makes explicit reference to these sceptical considerations (see Erion & Smith, 2002: 20-1). When the rebel leader Morpheus goes into the Matrix to enlist Neo to the resistance cause, he offers our hero the opportunity to "awaken" from his illusion. The conundrum he poses here is pure Descartes: "Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream?

How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?" Apart from direct allusions of this sort, a second strategy the filmmakers use is to bring the Cartesian thought experiments literally into being within the film. Thus the dream scenario becomes the computer-generated illusion of the Matrix. And when Neo awakens to his true state, he finds himself floating in a vat, hooked up to electrodes that have been feeding him his simulated reality. The evil demon, and the evil scientist, have been replaced by diabolical machine intelligence.

So we have film more overtly, self-consciously alluding to or drawing on philosophical themes and positions. In addition to this, and this is something that further indicates the possibilities opened up by the cinematic form, we can see *The Matrix* as embodying a process of philosophising. That is, as Wartenberg (2003) in particular has argued, *The Matrix* can be seen as doing something distinctively philosophical, namely unsettling our established habits of belief and action, getting us to call into question our taken-for-granted assumptions. This is what Descartes is doing in the first chapter of the *Meditations* through the dream and evil demon arguments. His project is to call into doubt any belief that might possibly be false. We ordinarily assume that our sense experience is a reliable guide to the way the world is. Through the dream and evil demon hypotheses Descartes asks us to consider the possibility that the world we experience through our senses might be entirely illusory. We could be having just the sorts of experiences that we are having now, but all the beliefs we have based on our sense experience might be false. Descartes is not simply laying out these arguments for us to consider, but making us think about our own situation, bringing us to question our ordinary assumptions about the world and what we think we know about it.

The Matrix enacts this process as well, in a visual rather than written form, with the evil demon replaced by the malevolent computers. Neo comes to realise that the world he took to be real is in fact a fabrication; and moreover, we viewers have an analogous experience – that the world we took to be real, which is to say the apparently real world the film portrays, is revealed to be a fabrication of the machines. As Wartenberg puts it:

> As a result of its ability to portray the possibility that the deception hypothesis is true, albeit only of a fictional world, the film is able to lead its audience to see that something analogous could be true of our world. Once we accept the possibility of the matrix doing what it does, we have to wonder whether we are not in the situation of the inhabitants of *The Matrix*. (Wartenberg, 2003: 150)

In other words, we are made to wonder about our own experience by the film, just as we are by Descartes' evil demon hypothesis. So to that extent, the film does not merely allude to a philosophical theme; it actually engages in philosophising, because it puts its viewers in a position where they are confronted by the unsettling question: how do you know you are not in a similar situation to that of *The Matrix*'s inhabitants?

Moreover, and this can count as a secondary theme for the purposes of this discussion, *The Matrix* can be seen as extending this philosophical scepticism into new areas. The all-embracing, collectively experienced virtual reality scenario presented in the movie is an extrapolation from existing technologies; but this also draws attention to those areas in contemporary life where technology has already made artificial realities possible. And the film raises its Cartesian question in connection with these artificial realities, and makes us think critically about our relationship to them. As Cynthia Freeland puts it, given its central scenario, *The Matrix* raises broader questions about "what it means to be seduced or deceived by artificial versions of reality" (Freeland, 2002: 213). One such artificial reality is that of cyberspace, the virtual world created by computer systems, ranging from computer-generated virtual reality itself, to interactive computer games, and most broadly the internet. Another area to consider in this connection is cinematic reality. That is, there is a reflexivity in *The Matrix*'s contemplation of artificial reality, since as a film it is itself a kind of artificial reality, a virtual reality video game. As Freeland puts it, when films like *The Matrix* reflect upon virtual reality, "there are obvious ways they might address viewers' engagements with the 'virtual reality' of movies" (Freeland, 2002: 205). We are not speaking in these cases of the total deception envisaged in *The Matrix*, but nonetheless there are forms of seduction, dependence and deception to consider here. We will return to this extension of philosophical reflection in a moment.

So, as we have seen, *The Matrix* both alludes to the philosophical problem of scepticism about the external world, and makes its viewers confront the question. At the same time this engagement with philosophical themes opens up the film to a further level of interaction with philosophy, because it becomes possible for this engagement to be criticised, for the film to be subjected to philosophical criticism. Despite raising the possibility of radical deception, portraying a situation in which people can be wholly taken in by what they think is reality, once Neo escapes from the Matrix (about half way through the film) all doubts about experience are mysteriously abandoned in the movie. The film in effect assumes that sceptical anxieties about the possibility of knowledge and the nature of reality are specific to the

particular Matrix it shows us, and that once we leave that behind, we leave the problem of scepticism behind (see Byron, 2004: 198-200).

But the issue of scepticism cannot be so easily contained or ignored, and it returns to trouble the rest of the film. There is nothing to prevent the reality Neo and the rebels inhabit being just part of another Matrix, a "meta-Matrix." We are left wondering why the rebels, having seen the Matrix in operation, aren't more concerned about this possibility of continuing deception. And so there is the unaddressed possibility that all Neo's adventures after the escape from the initial Matrix are themselves illusory, part of some higher level Matrix. In effect the film, having raised its sceptical questions, lapses back into a dogmatic slumber. By way of contrast, a film like *Total Recall* takes the issue more seriously, at least as a kind of cinematic tease. The doctor who has turned up at the hotel room tries to convince Schwarzenegger's Quaid that he is dreaming he is an invincible agent fighting the bad guys on Mars (or more accurately, dreaming out a memory-implant spy adventure holiday that we saw him paying for earlier on in the film), and must take a pill to wake up. However, the sweat on the doctor's brow indicating his nervousness tells Quaid that he really is on Mars, and that this is a trap. In fact the dream hypothesis is not so easily dismissed, since all such tell-tale signs of being awake could themselves be part of the dream; which means that all the action Quaid finds himself involved in could conceivably be part of one long dream. Here, however this possibility is teasingly acknowledged. Quaid's final words in the film are "I just had a terrible thought – what if this is a dream?" "Well then, kiss me quick before you wake up," says his female sidekick.

This possibility of continuing deception is also taken more seriously in *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), where the relevant illusion-creating device is a futuristic form of video game that plugs directly into the spine, and allows one to inhabit a complete virtual reality. Towards the end, the central characters Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and Ted Pikul (Jude Law) seem to escape from the game, only to realize that for all they know they may still be in it. In the final scene, it looks as if they have at last truly escaped. It appears that the game they have been playing, indeed everything that has happened so far in the film, has been part of a game they have been trying out. But just when they seem to have finally, definitively, returned to reality, someone is still able to ask: "Hey, tell me the truth – are we still in the game?" The film ends at this point, with the issue unresolved. As such it takes seriously the idea that given the possibility of a global illusion, nothing in our experience seems to be able to completely exclude the possibility that everything we currently experience might be an illusion. Anything we care to propose as a test for being awake could itself be part of the dream.

Thus *The Matrix* fails to fully deal with or follow through on the very skepticism theme that it raises. And this failure reappears in relation to the secondary theme noted above, the film's extension of skeptical considerations to other artificial realities made possible by modern technologies, including cinema itself. Whereas *eXistenZ* points to the dangerous allure and seductive character of virtual reality and computer game playing, *The Matrix* leaves behind its early misgivings about virtual reality and comes to celebrate immersion in the virtual realm, as the venue for self-realisation. That is, having escaped from the Matrix into reality, Neo then returns to the Matrix where he is able to develop superhuman powers and eventually to attain a certain kind of transcendence in order to become "The One." By the same token, although *The Matrix* through its reflective skepticism calls attention to the viewer's engagement with the alluring virtual reality of movies themselves, it ends up drawing us into the cinematic illusion – a seduction intensified by the hypnotic digital effects the film makes such effective use of, despite its implicit critique of computer-generated realities. As Freeland puts it,

> [i]deally, to be consistent, *The Matrix* ought to enable viewers to recognise and reject the seductive illusions of movies in favour of their own more creative choices. But I suspect it operates in the opposite way. The movie celebrates not freedom from the matrix, but the indulgence in exciting film simulations. (Freeland, 2002: 213; see also Gordon, 2003: 111).

So we find the film turning against its earlier position here, in a way that parallels the reversal noted earlier, the way in which *The Matrix* turns its back on the philosophical problem of scepticism it invokes.

Philosophy through The Matrix

Given these limitations in its handling of the scepticism theme it invokes, one might be tempted to say that *The Matrix* is a poor piece of philosophy, and perhaps even that consideration of such issues is really best left to philosophy proper. But this view presupposes that the film is simply a medium for conveying philosophical ideas. A film, it has to be remembered, is not a philosophical text; which is to say, it does a great deal more than just embody, represent or invoke philosophical themes. At the same time this very consideration, that the identification of philosophical themes does not exhaust what is going on in a film, might make it tempting to argue that the theoretical consideration of film is better left to other disciplines, such as film studies, more sensitive perhaps to the specifically cinematic features of film.

But this also is a questionable position. These philosophical themes are not simply alien impositions on films; they are part of what is going on.

The two views here mirror one another. One view turns its back on film in favour of philosophy, and the other turns its back on philosophy in favour of film. And no doubt there are times when one is simply a distraction from the other. However there are also points where philosophy and film interact, where one enters into or invokes the other, and this interaction is obscured if we insist that philosophy and film represent completely separate realms. What does this interaction involve? First of all, it means that highlighting the philosophical aspects of the film, as we have been doing to a limited extent with *The Matrix*, offers some degree of illumination as to what is going on in the film, what the film is doing, what it is drawing on or making use of to achieve its effects. Even pointing critically to limitations in the film's treatment of these themes brings out features of its internal structure, such as the tension between *The Matrix*'s realistic trajectory once Neo has left the Matrix, and the continuing possibility of radical illusion that the film tries unsuccessfully to repress.

Secondly, and this is something that has not really been addressed so far, the interaction can work the other way as well. That is, film in turn can be used to illustrate, illuminate and reflect on philosophical themes that extend beyond itself. Thus amongst other things *The Matrix* provides a means of illustrating and talking about Cartesian arguments for scepticism, and the issue of philosophical scepticism more generally. And the film's failure to follow through the very sceptical possibilities that it raises also helps to shed light on these philosophical ideas. It tells us something about the power of the Cartesian problem, the way in which it is enormously difficult to lay to rest the issue of scepticism once it has been raised. Moreover, this cinematic illumination of philosophical themes can extend to critical reflection on philosophical themes by way of film. We can pursue this further dimension of *The Matrix*'s interaction with philosophy by considering a different though related philosophical theme that the film calls into view, namely the traditional philosophical disdain for the body, and the idea of the self, mind or soul as being essentially disembodied and immaterial, as this theme is developed by Descartes and as it appears in the philosophical tradition more generally.

This theme is highlighted amongst others by Freeland, who criticises *The Matrix* for creating "a naïve fantasy of overcoming human flesh" (Freeland, 2002: 205). Here the focus has shifted from Neo's escaping the illusions of the Matrix into reality, to escaping reality and his own body by re-entering the Matrix. Once again the film can be seen as turning against its earlier position, in this case abandoning the idea of the Matrix as an

instrument of social control through the inculcation of illusion, in favour of the Matrix as an avenue of escape, liberation and enlightenment. Now ordinary physical reality is not something we seek to comprehend, but to rise above. As Freeland points out, in the reality that Neo finds himself, human beings are embodied, vulnerable beings, able to be penetrated in various ways. He awakens to a nightmare vision of countless naked bodies, floating in vats, plugged into tubes that maintain them and feed them their fake reality. In the grim reality aboard the rebel ship, he can only re-enter the Matrix by having a plug painfully inserted into the back of his neck. But once back in the Matrix, he is without his neck-bolt, able to perform spectacular feats, and once he undergoes his final transformation into "the One," becomes superhuman. He may still be embodied, but as Freeland notes, "[t]he perfect, exciting, memorable Keanu/Neo is intact, closed up, with no openings or flaws, no vulnerability – in short, with no relationship to his actual physical flesh-and-blood body" (Freeland, 2002: 209). In effect, Neo has transcended the physical reality of the flesh. And the film does not end on the ship with Neo's real body. Instead, we see a handsome, overcoated Neo wandering among the masses in the Matrix, then zipping off through the sky, promising "a world without rules and controls, without borders and boundaries, a world where anything is possible." His flying, like his words, suggest that humans need not be bound by their physical bodies. The movie feeds escapist fantasies of a mental reality where the elect few are unencumbered by rules (Freeland, 2002: 214).

Freeland offers this account as a critique of the "mentalistic bias" of the film, but the film also offers a vantage point for reflecting on Descartes and the philosophical tradition more generally. The "naïve fantasy" of overcoming the body presented in the film can be readily found in much Western thinking. Freeland points to the pervasiveness of this theme:

> Many feminist philosophers have argued that western philosophy has been an affair of men seeking mental escapes from their bodies, from the reality of flesh and blood. Such men include Plato, describing the world of transcendent Forms, Augustine and Aquinas, hoping for their soul's purity in heaven, and Descartes, establishing his identity as mind, not body. (Freeland, 2002: 206-7).

In Descartes' case, this notion of the self as essentially disembodied emerges out of his sceptical arguments. By rejecting all beliefs of which doubt is possible, he finds that the only certainty is that he exists; he can doubt everything except that he is doubting, that he is thinking, and he must exist in order to think. He then moves to the more controversial conclusion that he is essentially a thing that thinks. If he can doubt the existence of his body, his

physical attributes cannot be essential to who he is. He could be who he is without his body, and so the connection between his self and his body can only be non-essential or accidental; his physical features are accidental features of a self that is essentially disembodied.

In this way, *The Matrix*'s vision of overcoming the physical body can be thought of as finding a philosophical articulation in Descartes. But as Freeland indicates, Descartes is not the only thinker to seek the self's overcoming of the body. In establishing the thinking self as distinct from the body, Descartes is also reformulating an older notion of the human soul, understood as an immortal, indestructible, non-bodily substance, which has been around since antiquity and especially since Plato. For Plato (in the *Phaedo* especially 77a-84b, and elsewhere) the vulnerable, mortal body is said to imprison the soul, to corrupt it with bodily needs, and to stand in the way of understanding reality. The philosopher longs for the purification of the soul from the body, which comes only with death. As Hubert Dreyfus puts it, for Plato "it should be a human being's highest goal to 'die his body' and become a pure mind" (Dreyfus, 2001: 5). Only as pure mind can we behold the transcendent Forms, things in their purest form. The "immortal soul" is of course also central to Christianity. Despite the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection, the notion of the soul as immortal, indestructible and immaterial enforces a separation between the soul and the mortal, corruptible body. Aquinas struggles to preserve an integral view of the human person as mind and body, but in the end, with the immortality of the soul at stake, he has to concede that incorporeal existence is intelligible. Human fulfillment, happiness and self-realisation are not possible for human beings in this world. It is only in the next world when we can contemplate God that we can attain true fulfillment. As with Plato, for Aquinas also we have to die, to overcome our mortal bodies, if we are to become the pure souls that we most essentially are.

So *The Matrix* calls our attention to a large philosophical theme present not only in Descartes but also in Platonic and Christian thinking. And the film can, in its turn, be itself considered in the light of these doctrines of disembodiment. As we have seen, Freeland criticises the film as perpetuating the recurrent philosophical fantasy of overcoming the body, escaping the flesh; and we can draw more specific parallels as well. In connection with Descartes, before Neo has left the Matrix he could similarly argue that while he must exist as a thinking thing, there is no necessary connection between himself and a physical body. This is something that is in fact borne out in the film when he discovers, on escaping from the Matrix, that he has a body he has never used. It is also underscored by his ability to separate himself once more from his physical body, to leave it behind on the ship and reenter the

Matrix. For his part, Plato would no doubt have approved of Neo's overcoming of his finite physical body, his leaving the prison of his body in order to emerge into the more perfect world of the Matrix, where he himself is purified of imperfection and becomes what he truly is. And there are strong religious overtones in Neo's journey to self-realisation, his transformation into what is effectively a divine being, impervious to harm and able to perform miracles.

What is not so plausible, however, is any attempt to read Neo's progress as that of becoming a Nietzschean Overman (see e.g. Knight & McKnight, 2002: 189). Nietzsche is one of the most strident critics of the Platonic, Christian and Cartesian desire to escape the flesh, which he sees as symptomatic of a hatred or disdain for this world and the body that is ultimately self-destructive. Far from representing human beings as they most essentially are, the pure mind is an impoverished, reduced person. For his part Nietzsche rejects the idea of the self as disembodied and immortal. He conceives of the self as a "mortal soul," a soul that is not distinct from the body, a soul that is "only a word for something in the body" (Nietzsche, 1969: 61). In other words, the true self is not identified with intellectual abilities but with the emotions, drives and energies of the body, and these are crucial even for our intellectual and spiritual life. As Nietzsche says, "[b]ehind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, stands a mighty commander, an unknown sage – he is called Self. He lives in your body, he is your body" (Nietzsche, 1969: 62). Nietzsche certainly has the ideal of the Overman, in which human beings "overcome themselves," but this does not involve transcending the body. It is a this-worldly transcendence. As Dreyfus puts it, Nietzsche certainly looked forward to our transcending our human limitations and becoming overmen, "but by that he meant that human beings… would finally have the strength to affirm their bodies and their mortality" (Dreyfus, 2001: 6). From this point of view, *The Matrix*, with its vision of perfection through transcending the physical body, looks decidedly anti-Nietzschean.

There is another ideal of transcendence that *The Matrix* calls attention to. If the film provides a vantage point for thinking about the philosophical theme of transcending the body, it also provides a vantage point for thinking about this strange ideal of corporeal transcendence as it figures in thinking about the artificial world created by computer systems, from virtual reality to the internet. Neo transcends his physical body by reentering the Matrix, the computer-generated reality that is an extrapolation from existing

technologies; and there are a number of recent commentators[1] for whom cyberspace holds the promise that each of us will be able to transcend the limits imposed on us by our body, perhaps even downloading ourselves onto the web and becoming disembodied "cybersouls." As Kevin Robins puts it, "[a]ll this is driven by a feverish belief in transcendence; a faith that, this time round, a new technology will truly and finally deliver us from the limitations and frustrations of this imperfect world" (Robins, 1995: 136). Once again, *The Matrix* can in turn be considered in the light of these themes. For some commentators, *The Matrix* is straightforwardly a fictional anticipation of this promise of transcending ourselves through technology. Ray Kurzweil looks forward to a future in which we will "be able to 'recreate the world' according to our imaginations and enter environments as amazing as that of *The Matrix*" (Kurzweil, 2003, 228). In a more nuanced reading, P. Chad Barnett suggests that "[p]erhaps the most engaging and seductive line of thinking throughout the Wachowski brothers' film is the possibility that at a sensory level, virtual reality is far superior to physical reality" (Barnett, 2000: 371). For Barnett this line of thinking is suggested not so much by Neo as by Joe Pantoliano's Cypher, the crewmember willing to betray his comrades in order to escape from depressing reality and return to the Matrix. While the film presents Cypher as a moral coward unable to face reality, Barnett suggests that he can also be seen as facing an engaging dilemma: "is humanity best served by maintaining the subject… at any cost, or is the human condition improved by a gentler virtual reality that offers endless virtual possibilities?" (Barnett, 2000: 371).

But the ideal of corporeal transcendence through technology has its critics as well. As Dreyfus notes, this idea of freeing ourselves from bodily limitation and vulnerability, from weakness, sickness and mortality, and gaining a new freedom and capacities not previously available to human beings, represents the latest reappearance of the Platonic, Christian and Cartesian dream of escaping the flesh, now in technological guise. Once again, there is nothing Nietzschean about this aspiration, even though as Dreyfus points out, Nietzsche's Overman is precisely the figure that the more extreme net visionaries like to refer to in describing their aspirations (Dreyfus, 2001: 5-6). It is an aspiration to an unworldly utopian ideal, a new kind of heavenly afterlife, fuelled by a non-Nietzschean disdain for the body which is dismissed as "meat," and for a world pronounced to be imperfect, disappointing, dead or dying. In Dreyfus's own Nietzsche-inspired analysis of the internet, this represents a profound misrecognition of the role of the

[1] For example Ray Kurzweil, Hans Moravec, Nicholas Negroponte and Marvin Minsky.

body. It is not a limitation that we need to outgrow; it is central to our sense of reality and meaningful existence. The more we live our lives through the internet, without bodily vulnerability, the more we lose a sense of the reality of the physical world and our sense that we can trust other people (not to hurt us); and if we can take any position we like without risk or consequences, our commitments are undermined and life is deprived of any serious meaning (see Dreyfus, 2001: 98-106). If the mind purified of the body is in reality an impoverished person, it would seem that living through the internet is an impoverished form of life.

In the last analysis, even when we enter into the internet we never leave behind our bodies, free ourselves from time and space, or shed the limits of our particular circumstances, our gender, age, ethnicity and so on. More broadly, the internet and other virtual worlds created by computer systems remain part of this world. They are not an alternative to it, a higher and more perfect world. In order to see cyberspace as an other-worldly space we have to narrow our vision and turn a blind eye to the world that we live in, to the material, institutional, cultural and political context within which technologies like the internet are developed and promoted, and in which they operate. This is not to deny that these technologies make possible an extension of human powers and capacities, or an expansion of the space for imaginative possibilities. But this realm also remains a virtual one, dependent on a real world that we can never ultimately escape, and a transcendence that remains confined to this realm is in real terms very limited in nature. Coming back to *The Matrix*, this is perhaps why the film's own defining representation of the vision of transcendence through technology – the final shot of Neo flying off into the sky, promising a "world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, where anything is possible" – comes across on reflection as rather idealistic. While what Neo says and does provides an exhilarating image of escaping all physical boundaries and limitations, it is only a virtual escape; and if this escape were to be confined to the Matrix it would not amount to anything substantial or significant. By the same token, if this is going to amount to anything more than merely a virtual escape, it has to be extended into the real world; and here it has to be recognised that there are always rules, controls, borders and boundaries of some sort that we as finite creatures have to contend with.

To summarise then, as well as drawing on and making use of philosophical themes for its own purposes, *The Matrix* also affords us the opportunity of reflecting on larger philosophical themes; and in particular, the film offers a vision of escaping the flesh, of leaving the body behind, which calls attention to such "escapist fantasies" as they appear in the larger philosophical tradition and in certain recent interpretations of our encounter

with computer-generated reality. Applied to one more form of artificial reality, cinematic reality, such thinking might tempt us to see a film like *The Matrix* as an escapist fantasy, allowing us to escape from ordinary reality and our mundane physical existence into the exciting virtual reality of the movie; with we ourselves, the moviegoers, perhaps as minds "plugged into" the adventure while our body remains immobile in the theatre. At this point, however, the parallel starts to look very strained indeed. We can appreciate the idea that films might serve as a distraction, an escape from our ordinary lives and concerns, without committing ourselves to the outlandish idea that watching them amounts to our having a quasi-Cartesian "out of body" experience. And the entire discussion to this point is premised on a film like *The Matrix* not representing a form of pure escapism that takes us away from the world we live in. Like the internet, cinematic experience can always be firmly located within the material, institutional, cultural and political context from which it emerges. What distinguishes *The Matrix* is the extent to which it has engaged in particular with elements of the philosophical tradition, an engagement reflected in the academic and popular interest that the film has generated for its treatment of philosophical matters. As we have seen even in this brief discussion, the film draws on and makes use of key themes in the philosophical tradition, such as the philosophical arguments concerning skepticism; and it can be used in turn to illuminate or reflect on further aspects of our philosophical and cultural tradition, such as the persistent dream of escaping the flesh. This interaction is one of the more significant aspects of the *Matrix* phenomenon, and it also gives us some general insight into the ways in which film and philosophy may engage with one another.

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SIMULACRA, SIMULATION AND *THE MATRIX*

SVEN LUTZKA

Abstract

Since its blockbuster release in 1999, *The Matrix* has triggered off an avalanche of studies focusing on different aspects of the movie. What is striking about the proliferation of explanations of *The Matrix* is the extent to which the early writings of Jean Baudrillard, especially his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1983), now appear as the chief interpretive grid of the movie. Under close scrutiny, however, it soon becomes obvious that a reading of the movie in terms of Baudrillard's theory is based on a profound misunderstanding of his tenets. Departing from a critical re-examination of those studies that see in *The Matrix* a meticulous visualization of Baudrillard's theory, it will be elucidated that the film's explicit visual reference to *Simulacra and Simulation* is but one element within the "smorgasbord" of a double-coded network (Charles Jencks) of intertextual references.

By resorting to Fredric Jameson's concept of pastiche and his theory on late capitalism, this essay sets out to illustrate that *The Matrix* is a comprehensive reflection and representation of postmodern culture at the conclusion of the twentieth century. As such the film functions as an example of the distinct and contrasting modes of discourse that have come to define both culture and aesthetic production in contemporary Western societies.

Simulations of Reality in Postmodern American Film

A key feature of postmodern thought is the idea of simulation: the notion that in the contemporary world much of life has been transformed into a mere "fake." According to French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, Western culture has been subjected to what might be called a progressive insertion of simulation into life. Over the past decades, human ingenuity has made it possible to create all kinds of "fakes" that are so realistic that it is becoming hard to distinguish them from that which they are an imitation of. The distortion of the demarcation line separating the real from the unreal seems to

exert an ever-growing influence on many aspects of everyday life (cf. for example Plo-Astrué & Martínez-Alfaro, 2002; Smith, 2001).

A number of recent movies deals explicitly with this blurring of boundaries between the real and the unreal – from comedic meditations on 1950s sitcoms (*Pleasantville*, 1998) to special-effects blockbuster action films (*The Matrix*, 1999) together with some neo-Orwellian TV fantasies (*The Truman Show*, 1998). Since its blockbuster release, *The Matrix* – according to David Webermann the "most sustained (implicitly) philosophical film" (2002: 226) – has astounded and enthralled its fans with its presumedly subtle allusions and seemingly infinite depths. The Wachowski brothers, who wrote and directed the film, deliberately spliced many philosophical and religious themes with futuristic science and technology. When asked how many hidden allusions there could be found in *The Matrix*, the Wachowski brothers once teased, "More than you'll ever know" (quoted in Rothstein, 2003). This allusive box-office hit has triggered an unprecedented avalanche of studies focusing on different aspects of the movie. As Lacanian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek suggests, the reason for the ever-growing body of secondary literature on *The Matrix* is based on the film's Rorschach-inkblot-like quality (2002: 240). Philosophers see their favored theory in it: existentialism, Marxism, feminism, Buddhism, nihilism, postmodernism. As William Irwin blatantly suggests, "[n]ame your philosophical *ism* and you can find it in *The Matrix*" (2002: 5).

What is striking about the proliferation of studies on *The Matrix* is the extent to which the early writings of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, especially his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994 [1983]), appear as the chief interpretive grid for the movie (cf. for example Degler, 2002; Felluga, 2003; Simpkins, 2000; Rüsel, 2002; Watson, 2003). Dino Felluga, for example, argues that the film "perfectly exemplifies this [i.e. Baudrillard's] idea by literalizing it" (2003: 75).

The present re-examination of *The Matrix* will elucidate that the common denominator comprising the various aspects the movie alludes to has to be looked for on a different level: unlike the majority of existing studies that tackle the blurring of the real/unreal dichotomy by means of Baudrillard's theory, it will be shown that by resorting to Fredric Jameson's concept of pastiche, another meta-interpretive foil lurks beneath the surface of the movie.[1] The advantage of this approach lies in the fact that it allows for an overall interpretation of the film encompassing the henceforth unrelated aspects – philosophical as well as non-philosophical ones.

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[1] A similar approach has recently been employed to the Matrix franchise (see Isaacs & Trost, 2004).

Postmodern Reality Games

While the philosophical line of thought dealing with the distortion of the real/unreal dichotomy has its own intricate history, this part will outline some of the chief characteristics of postmodern films, thus establishing a basis for the subsequent analysis of the film in question.

In *Postmodernism Now*, Charles Altieri observes that the most significant way "early postmodernism still affects what artists do and still provides powerful exemplary stances for its audience" is by its alteration "from envisioning works of art as fundamentally self-interpreting and self-sustaining to treating them as relational structures that become complete only when readers and viewers carry aspects of the work into concrete situations" (1998: 286). Meta-narrative art, he argues, especially invites critical attention by the audience to such completion, outside the narrative frame, but obviously not all meta-narratives can be considered postmodern. In terms of Altieri's observations, postmodern art establishes a playful relation with its audience – *playful* in the sense that Ihab Hassan had in mind when he differentiated the postmodern from the modern with the words "play" and "purpose" (1987: 91). According to Hassan, modernist experimentation tends to be purposeful, whereas postmodern experimentation tends to be playfully free of such intentionality.

Contemporary movies frequently employ a meta-narrative device or strategy that involves ontological play, "the artful manipulation of two or more different levels of perceived reality in the minds of the characters, and by extension, in the minds of the audience as well" (Aubrey, 2001: 18). When a film puts two realities of different ontological status side by side, it engages the audience in comparing and judging those realities. James R. Aubrey calls this sub-category of meta-narrative film "Reality Games" (18).

The chief characteristic of postmodern "Reality Games," Aubrey claims, is that such films are meta-narratives which play a game with the viewer's understanding of what is real:

> Such a film presents one reality but subverts it with another, so the audience initially accepts one construct of reality only to have that acceptance disturbed by revelation of the superior ontological status of a second reality that presents itself during the course of the film. (Aubrey, 2001: 19)

The use of such doubled realities encourages the viewers to cast doubt upon their own common-sense notions of reality. Other recent movies have engaged the audience in a similar way, inviting them to evaluate ontological

alternatives and even actively participate in the film as a game that is started but not ended within the cinematic frame, to play rather than to be content with passive spectatorship and formal closure. It is from this theoretical characterization of a particular type of contemporary postmodern American film that the analysis of *The Matrix* will proceed.

The Matrix

A mise-en-scène analysis of *The Matrix* reveals that every visual sign that can be deciphered by the audience – titles of books, tattoos, and the like – is charged with allegorical, metaphorical, or metonymical layers of meaning, thus spanning a connotational network over the narrative layer and simultaneously reinforcing some of the basic motifs of the film. In *The Matrix* almost every prop seems to have been included deliberately.

The first image that the audience perceives is the Warner Brothers logo.[2] It appears in monitor-green encircled by gloomy, portentous clouds. In this first image, before the feature film has yet begun, significant topics – computer-generated artificiality and the remnants of a post-war world – are visually introduced by the bleak and menacing design. The opening scene takes the moviegoer, who is still ignorant of the use of doubled realities, into the artificial world of the Matrix. The scene is set at night and the bleak atmosphere recalls the film *noir* aesthetic. However, *The Matrix*'s opening at first appears to represent a realistic police raid when police cars arrive with sirens flashing in front of the seedy "Heart of the City" hotel. Four police officers get out and draw their guns; they head for room 303 of the hotel. One of the cops breaks down a door, and they proceed to overwhelm and arrest "a woman in black leather" (Wachowski, 2001: 3): Trinity, who is sitting in the dark in front of a computer keyboard. The room is almost devoid of furniture. It is sparsely equipped with a fold-up table and a chair with a phone, a modem, and a computer. The only light in the room is the glow emanating from the computer-screen. On the wall of the room the audience can read the inscription "City Hearding Phone."

Audience expectations are overturned, however, when Trinity suddenly starts kicking furniture at the police officers and then runs round the walls of the room faster than they can shoot at her, until she has managed to

[2] The concept of the logotype has been with us since medieval times, when guildsmen stamped their work with a proprietary mark. In the twentieth century, the logo became a crucial mark of corporate identity. Manfred Rüsel noticed that it was unusual until recently to integrate the production logo within the aesthetic concept of a film (2002: 224).

kill everyone and narrowly escapes across the rooftops – into a telephone line. The scene not only economically establishes the gritty, violent texture of the outlaw world and the life-or-death stakes of the film, but also the fact that the conventional limits of realism do not apply.

A visually-mediated network of references is introduced: the "Heart of the City" hotel functions as the setting where the narrative starts and ends. The inscription on the wall refers to the surveillance system of the Matrix. The number on the doorplate – 303 – and the female personification of the Holy Trinity introduce the religious overtones of the film. Apart from the religious overtones,[3] the fight choreography and martial arsenals are reminiscent of popular computer games. The lead actors underwent four months of kung fu training, so that they could play the fight scenes themselves. Trinity's virtual model is obviously Lara Croft. The film's cultural references to contemporary computer games and to contemporary action movies resorting to kung fu aesthetics have contributed to the vast box-office success of *The Matrix* (cf, Rüsel, 2002: 222).

The movie's main character, Neo, makes his first appearance in front of a computer. He has fallen asleep in front of his computer monitor. Several international newsflashes appear on the screen of the monitor. A top-shot shows the room from above: several monitors and computers give the audience a general overview of the protagonist's private sphere. The distanced position of the camera on the fictional ceiling effects a sudden change of the narrative point of view. Neo is being monitored. A sudden cut makes us see Neo in a close-up shot: the face of the sleeping protagonist. The request: "Wake up, Neo…" appears on the computer screen. Neo wakes up. The following dialogue starts:

> Screen: The Matrix has you...
> Neo: What the hell..?
> Screen: Follow the white rabbit.
> Neo: …white rabbit?
> Screen: Knock, Knock, Neo. (Wachowski, 2001: 9)

At that very moment someone knocks on Neo's apartment door. Neo cautiously opens the door. The number on the apartment door is shown: 101. A group of persons, led by a couple (Choi and Dujour), has come to pick up a promised piece of illegal software. After Neo has answered the knock on his

[3] Rüsel notes that the use of Christian-religious texts is by no way an invention of contemporary science fiction film. Musicians like Madonna, for example, have contributed to the fact that sacred symbols have long since become part of popular culture's image archive (2002: 226).

door – predicted by the words "knock, knock" on his computer screen – he returns inside to secure the software from his stash in a hollowed-out book. For just a moment we glimpse the title: Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations*.

After Neo has handed over the illegal software, Choi remarks, "Hallelujah. You're my savior, man. My own personal Jesus Christ" (10). The following short dialogue between Neo and Choi reveals that Neo suspects that things are not quite right. He asks Choi, "You ever have that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?" (11). Suddenly, Neo's eyes meet the tattoo of a white rabbit on Dujour's shoulder. The camera zooms in on the white-rabbit tattoo from Neo's point of view. On seeing the tattoo, Neo decides to accompany Dujour and her friends to a dance club, where he meets Trinity for the first time. Trinity brings Neo to see Morpheus in a damp and depressing building. Morpheus says, "I imagine, right now, you must be feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole" (27). He offers Neo a choice of two pills, a red pill that would allow him to see the world as it "really is," and a blue pill that would let him wake up in his bed and remember everything as a dream: "You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes" (29). Neo chooses the red pill.

This short exposition makes clear how carefully *The Matrix* has been designed, both visually and acoustically, unfolding an ingenious network of intertextual references: 101, the number on Neo's apartment door (amongst other things of course) explicitly refers to the binary code of the computer. As becomes clear in the course of the film, the minimal digital series of 0 and 1 – representing the passing and non-passing of the electrical signal – refers to the radical reduction of the wealth of a human being's sensory experience, another aspect frequently alluded to in the movie, marked by the Virtual Reality of the Matrix.

The small-talk like dialogue between Neo and Choi, with its focus on Neo's role as a savior and on the possible bogus nature of the Matrix reality, together with the visual arrangement of the first scenes of the film, features a subtle network of intertextual references. Neo's "dialogue" with the computer, the white rabbit tattoo, and the liquefying mirror explicitly refer to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The central position of the real/unreal dichotomy hinting at Neo's imminent journey which will allow him to look behind the looking-glass and see "wonderland" – just like Carroll's protagonist – is evoked by the ephemeral visual reference to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*.

On the whole, the analysis of the aesthetic dimension of *The Matrix* demonstrates that the Wachowski brothers have woven a variety of

intertextual references into the fabric of the film. It is possible to divide these references into at least two groups: on the one hand, there are allusions that can only be adequately understood by the – arguably small – "elite" fraction of moviegoers who are well versed in postmodern theory. On the other hand, the movie makes explicit references to well-known cultural artifacts like *Alice in Wonderland*, which are endowed with an almost myth-like status and are firmly established in the cultural awareness of Western societies. Furthermore, this division demonstrates that the treatment of the real/unreal dichotomy in *The Matrix* can be approached from a variety of entrance points like the Matrix itself. As *The Matrix* is one example of what Aubrey calls "Reality Games," it opens up a number of possible ways for the audience to relate to the film. This characteristic evokes Charles Jencks's definition of postmodernism as *double coding*: "the combination of Modern techniques with something else (usually traditional building) in order for architecture to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects" (1986: 14). Similarly, in *The Matrix*, the Wachowski brothers create double coding through eclecticism. The intertextual allusions in *The Matrix* simultaneously address an elite minority audience through high-art codes, and a mass audience through popular codes.

The Matrix and Baudrillard's Theory of the Simulacrum

So far, secondary literature has frequently privileged Baudrillard's essay "The Precession of Simulacra" as the main interpretive foil of the movie, as the enormous quantity of existing studies demonstrates. Proceeding swiftly from the full-screen shot of Baudrillard's compilation of essays, many critics have conceived of *The Matrix* as a movie that meticulously visualizes Baudrillard's notions in a feasible and easily accessible way. While these critics claim that the analogies between Baudrillard's theory and the world as it is pictured by *The Matrix* are obvious (cf. Rüsel 2002: 224), in what follows, these Baudrillardian interpretations of the movie will undergo a critical re-examination. In the course of the following part, the degree to which Baudrillard's ideas can be applied in an overall interpretation of the movie will be tested. In the course of this section the shortcomings underlying such apodictic statements like for example Simpkins's claim that *The Matrix* "moves through 'The Precession of Simulacra' almost line by line" (2000: 7) will be refuted. The aporias of existing studies, however, will not be considered as unsolvable impasses but will subsequently be incorporated into an overall interpretation of the film in the concluding part of this essay.

As already mentioned, the copy of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* that Neo opens in an early scene of the film is a fake, a hollowed-out prop serving as a hiding-place for illegal software. This image, with its reduplication of fakery – the title plus the fact that the book itself is a sham – is an early hint at Neo's final discovery of the wholly simulated world in which he lives. The book is a sham in another way: it is thicker than the real book and the end chapter at which Neo opens the book, "On Nihilism," has become a middle chapter. This, however, is not the only reference to Baudrillard's theory. In a later scene, Morpheus, the rebel leader, introduces Neo to the wasteland that the actual, post-war world of 2199 has become. "The desert of the real" (38), he says, explicitly alluding to a line from Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994: 1). Doug Mann and Heidi Hochenedel infer from this explicit reference to the Baudrillardian metaphor of the "desert of the real" that in *The Matrix* the Wachowski brothers argue along with the French theorist

> that there is no longer a reality to which we can return because the map of the landscape (the simulacra) has replaced most of the original territory. All that remains is a barren and forsaken desert. (Mann & Hochenedel, 2003)[4]

Moreover, Mann and Hochenedel maintain that Baudrillard's "Empire" is synonymous with the Matrix reality, created by machines of Artificial Intelligence (AI). According to them, the "real" world in the film was of no interest to the machines, and they do not seek to dominate it. The hyperreal world of the Matrix was the only "territory" worth defending, something the machines did at all costs. The real world as depicted in the movie *does* closely resemble Baudrillard's metaphor of the desert of the real. However, Mann and Hochenedel do not take into account that the movie's heroes aim at the destruction of the Matrix reality and the liberation of its virtual prisoners, whereas Baudrillard claims that "[n]ever again will the real have the chance to produce itself" (1994: 2). Since the plot of the movie revolves around the idea of a return to reality and thus the abolition of hyperreality, the entire film evidently adheres to and believes in a clear-cut demarcation

[4] Similar to Mann's and Hochedel's contention, Jim Rovira claims that the Matrix reality brilliantly exemplifies Baudrillard's definition of the simulacrum: "In the film, twentieth century earth is gone. The real world is a nuclear wasteland; cities are charred and empty, life on earth is only possible beneath the surface. But an exact copy exists in the form of a computer program. People are living in a simulacra [*sic*], a copy which is its own reality." The same path is taken by Dino Felluga, who argues that *The Matrix* literalizes Baudrillard's claim that "the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it" (2003: 1).

line between the real and the unreal. By contrast for Baudrillard it is neither possible to return to reality, nor are simulacra and simulation forced on human beings. Contemporary society is the result of the historical development of the four successive phases of the sign. The fact that Mann and Hochenedel do not take into consideration one of the most obvious narrative aspects of the film – i.e. its movement towards the ultimate destruction of the computer-generated simulation of the Matrix reality – already points to a profound misunderstanding either of Baudrillard or of the movie – or both.

In a line from the screenplay draft that was cut from the final version of the film Morpheus even tells Neo, "You have been living inside a dreamworld, Neo. As in Baudrillard's vision, your whole life has been spent inside the map, not the territory" (Wachowski, 2001: 38). This reference shows that in *The Matrix* the Wachowski brothers have deliberately chosen to play with Baudrillard's theory, thus providing one point of reference for the audience. Apart from explicitly referring to the French sociologist by mentioning his name, the line from the original script demonstrates that this reference is by no means intended to provide an accurate illustration of Baudrillard's tenets. According to Baudrillard, the binary opposition between the map and the territory is of no use today. In fact, this line could only be interpreted in terms of Borges's fable. Borges still believed in this dichotomy, whereas Baudrillard assumes that there no longer exists a demarcation line between the concept and the real. What *does* exist today, Baudrillard claims, is a "hyperreal." As with the other allusions, the references to Baudrillard are only bits and pieces, lacking the profoundness of the original and leaving out its ultimate pessimism, for the film offers a solution to the problem of simulation whereas Baudrillard believes that there is none.

Having considered some of the misconceptions of existing studies, the question remains: how exactly does Baudrillard's notion of simulation operate in *The Matrix*? *The Matrix* is about what Baudrillard would call "the fourth order of simulation" (1994: 6), which bears no relation to reality whatsoever. The everyday world Neo inhabits is totally false, a dream world with no substance and no relation to 2199. Artificial intelligence has created a virtual reality simulacrum of a world that closely resembles that of the movie's audience, a world which no longer exists in 2199. It is a hyperreal world, "produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these" (Baudrillard, 1994: 2).

According to Baudrillard, in the electronic era, "it is the real that has become our true utopia – but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the

possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object" (1994: 123). The real, he contends, has been replaced by the electronic and other forms of simulation, by "models of a real without origin or reality" (1994: 1). The real is past recovery, and even if we wanted to, we could not tell the simulation from the real any more.

While *The Matrix* repeats variations of the theme of the real versus the unreal through intertextual references to the classic popular fantasies *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*, both of which play on the notion of two separate worlds, one real and the other dreamlike, Baudrillard is of course only one aspect in the elaborate network of intertextuality in *The Matrix*. The question thus becomes: is *The Matrix* really an intellectual action film, or is it a kind of postmodern "smorgasbord" of intertextual references that lack the profundity of their originals? And secondly, how profound is the Wachowski's understanding of Baudrillard? Are they simply borrowing from Baudrillard to give their film an intellectual cachet?

Firstly, it is worth noting that there are two worlds in the film – the dream world of the Matrix, which is a computer-simulated version of 1999, and the real world of the post-apocalyptic Earth of 2199 – and there is a strict division between the two. As William Gibson puts it in his foreword to the screenplay, Neo is, in this version, "a hero of the Real" (Wachowski, 2001: viii), i.e. *The Matrix* offers a simplified and romanticized version of *Simulacra and Simulation*. It is only for the Matrix reality which closely resembles life in a city at the end of the twentieth century that Baudrillard claims about twentieth-century America would be applicable.

Visually, this division is made very clear and, furthermore, the entire plot of *The Matrix* is heavily dependent upon the strict demarcation line between the real and unreal. According to cinematographer Bill Pope, the Matrix world has digitally enhanced skies to make them white. "Additionally, since we wanted the Matrix reality to be unappealing […] we sometimes used green filters." In contrast, "[t]he future world is cold, dark, and riddled with lightning, so we left the lighting a bit bluer and made it dark as hell. Also, the future reality is very grimy" (quoted in Probst, 1999: 33). The Wachowskis' concept in *The Matrix* more closely resembles nineteenth-century romantic notions of a division between two worlds: a false world of appearances that obstructs or disguises the true world (Gordon, 2003: 100). Once we clear away the illusion, we can dwell in the real world. It is finally nothing but the old distinction between appearance and reality.

Aside from the recovery of the real in the film, it should be noted that the messianic subtext also completely contradicts Baudrillard's pessimism about the triumph of hyperreality. The film is filled with Christian allegory, for Neo proves to be the prophesied messiah who will free

humanity from the computerized dream world. There are also names redolent of Christian symbolism, such as Trinity or Cypher, who functions as a Judas figure (Gordon, 2003: 100). According to Bill Pope, "[i]t's a pretty complicated Christ story, but for the Wachowskis and myself, one of the best kinds of comic book is the origin story, which outlines the beginning of a superhero like Daredevil or Spiderman. *The Matrix* is the origin story of Neo" (in Probst, 1999: 33).

Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum is obviously only one aspect alluded to in *The Matrix*. As the preceding analysis has demonstrated, it is impossible to resort to Baudrillardian notions for an overall interpretation of the movie. An interpretation of *The Matrix* in terms of Baudrillard's postmodern tenets only works if solely concentrating on human life within the computer-generated simulation of the Matrix. As Frank Degler pointed out, Baudrillard's position is similar to that of a subject who cannot leave the Matrix, but who is aware of living in a simulation (2002: 171). Consequently, it may indeed be possible to analyze the Matrix reality in terms of Baudrillard, for it closely resembles that of an American city at the close of the twentieth century. In *The Matrix*, however, the group of people living on board the *Nebuchadnezzar* can make the transition between the true and the simulated world (Degler, 2002: 171). Baudrillard's analysis of American culture is at odds with the world represented in *The Matrix* for in the film we know very well where the "real" world is. It seems that even within the realm of Baudrillard's "fourth order of simulacra," the film can represent it and tell a heroic tale of the recovery of the real.

Having presented the main objections to the assumption that *The Matrix* is a meticulous visualization of Baudrillardian ideas, one can safely postulate that the film deliberately alludes to Baudrillard's tenets, but does so in a superficial way. The Wachowskis have deliberately chosen to allude to a wide variety of excerpts on a rather superficial level. However, one should also be cautious with remarks that downrightly deride the movie as an intellectual poseur or a flawed attempt at an intellectual action movie (cf. for example Freeland, 2002). If compared to other recent films like *The Thirteenth Floor*, *The Truman Show* or *Pleasantville*, it becomes clear that *The Matrix* definitely deserves a special place within the cluster of "Reality Games" produced within the last ten years. According to Aubrey's claim that postmodern "Reality Games" juxtapose two realities of different ontological status, the depiction of the Matrix reality and the "real" reality invites the audience to compare and judge those realities. The references to Baudrillard can be conceived of as one element within a variety of intertextual references which in turn enable the audience to think of the "Reality Game" in terms of Baudrillard's theory.

However, the question still lingers: how to account for the intertextual references in the movie? How to arrive at an overall interpretation that could also take into consideration that the "Wachowski Brothers' audience is not the tiny elite that reads Baudrillard but a generation bred on comics and computers" (Gordon, 2003: 97). On the basis of the analysis above, it is possible to conceive of *The Matrix* as a postmodern pastiche of bits and pieces. Apart from the Bible and Hong Kong action films, the Wachowskis have been heavily influenced by other media as well – especially comic books, graphic novels – including Japanese manga, music videos, TV commercials, fashion ads, and Hong Kong action movies. "More successfully than anyone else, the Wachowskis have translated a comic-book sensibility to the movies" (Mitchell, 2000: 224). The brothers wrote for Marvel comics and originally conceived of *The Matrix* as a comic book, and it retains a lot of the graphic punch of that medium. They hired several comic-book artists "to hand-draw the entire film as a highly graphic storyboard bible" (Probst, 1999: 32). Their visual-effects supervisor John Gaeta says, "They're authentic comic book freaks, and that's where many of their cinematic ideas come from – Japanimation and deviant comics artists" (in Magid, 1999: 46).

The Matrix and Jameson's Concept of Pastiche

According to Umberto Eco, popular culture seems to take delight in familiar scenery when it is carried out with a touch of pastiche. *The Matrix* uses this postmodern aesthetic brilliantly. As demonstrated, the film can be conceived of as a world composed of the fragments of other worlds in film. It is a heterogeneous space "in which the Action, Western, Romance, Japanese Anime, and Hong Kong Kung Fu genres all mingle to enhance the constructed nature of the film and the virtual reality that it depicts" (Barnett, 2000: 326). The juxtaposing and interlacing of a variety of languages, styles, registers, genres, and intertextual citations in postmodern texts contribute to a plurality of discourse that Brian McHale, referring to Mikhail Bakhtin, describes as "heteroglossia" (1989: 166). Typically, heteroglossia is employed as an opening wedge, a means of breaking up the unified projected world into a polyphony of worlds of discourse (167). In *The Matrix*, this polyphony of discourse "transgresses and disrupts the received assurances of traditional aesthetic forms and problematizes the boundaries and limits of representation" (Novotny, 1997: 100) in a typically postmodern fashion. As Patrick Novotny explains:

> [p]ost-modernism is characterized by experimentation with literary form and representation, through the use of styles and conventions from popular culture,

> music, art and literature. Postmodern collage extracts "found" materials out of their original context and juxtapositions them in other representational settings. Postmodernism's collage of appropriated images and styles undermines and subverts traditional representational forms, and thereby furthers the collapse of distinctions between aesthetic genres. (Novotny, 1997: 100)

The blurring of representational genres and the infusion of different cultural styles helps to define the postmodern scene in general. "Postmodern eclecticism has emerged as the contestation of cultural cohesion and homogeneity, and thus embodies the fragmentary nature of contemporary experience" (101). This is precisely the kind of aesthetic exercise an audience might expect from a film that theorizes the fragmentation of a defunct civilization in the wake of a multinational society razed to rubble by the domination of the technology that it invented.

The heterogeneous space that makes up *The Matrix* also accounts for the problem of assigning a fixed genre label to the film.[5] As Deborah Knight and George McKnight explain, *The Matrix* is most appropriately understood as a mixed-genre film.[6] *The Matrix* draws upon the conventionalized characteristics, structural elements, and topics of a wide range of popular genres and subgenres. The dynamic between the familiar and the innovative in *The Matrix* is established through pastiche, that is, by reassembling features from various "consensus genres and subgenres into one coherent storyline" (Knight & McKnight, 2002: 192). While this collage is often in the mood of postmodern playfulness, it also contributes to the much more somber aesthetic sensibility of the movie in terms of its implicit commentary on an increasingly Net-dependent, technocentric society. The virtual reality

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[5] Historically, Hollywood cinema has been deeply rooted in genre, but *The Matrix* defies examination as a genre film (Knight & McKnight, 2002: 188). Knight and McKnight also call attention to the fact that "[t]hinking in genre terms involves recognizing how a particular genre film fits into a complex set of industrial, and communicative exchanges between producers and consumers of genre fictions" (189).

[6] The description of mixed genre changes from critic to critic. Knight and McKnight quote various labels attached to the film: "For instance, *Splicedonline*'s Rob Blackwelder (http://www.splice-donline.com/99reviews/matrix.html) calls *The Matrix* a 'virtual reality sci-fi thriller' – thus distinguishing it from, […] a non-sci-fi virtual reality thriller […]. Andrew O'Hehir from salon.com draws attention to *The Matrix* cinematic style which gives a European art-cinema inflection to the movie's many references, which include the films of John Woo, the *Alien* series, the *Terminator* series, and of course *Blade Runner*. O'Hehir adds that *The Matrix* 'is all of those films, as well as a video game, a primer on Zen Buddhism, and a parable of the Second Coming'" (2002: 192).

along with the vision of cyberspace the film offers are rather troubling. In cyberspace, as within the projected virtual reality that imprisons human beings in *The Matrix*, there is no space for a referent at the base of the hallucination. Instead, all that remains are residual images from a time long forgotten. This is a world of pure Jamesonian depthlessness in which the surfaces of objects and people are all that remain.

The blend of genres, literary allusions, popular cultural references and filmic tropes that forms this film strikes the viewer not as mocking the original, but as "one of the most significant features of or practices in postmodernism today […], pastiche" (Jameson, 1991: 4). Although viewers of *The Matrix* will recognize both the genres and allusions being reworked, they will typically not get the sense that there is some material being parodied. In the postmodern age, the polyphony of worlds of discourse that problematizes the boundaries and limits of representation is the only viable means of representation that remains, because standard modes of discourse no longer exist. As a heterotopian construct, *The Matrix* functions as an allegory representing the distinct and contrasting modes of discourse that have come to define both culture and aesthetic production in the late capitalist society.

Conclusion

The main objective of this analysis was to re-examine existing studies on *The Matrix* that have used the tenets of Jean Baudrillard as the chief interpretive grid of the movie. In a sense, the mere assumption that a "Reality Game" like *The Matrix* can be tackled solely in terms of Baudrillard's essay "The Precession of Simulacra," defies one of postmodernism's main criteria: the skepticism with regard to what François Lyotard calls "metanarratives" or "grand narratives" (1988: xxiv). Postmodernism considers it impossible to find a single explanation that would account for all the diverse phenomena of the world. Since – according to Ihab Hassan – postmodernism is characterized by a "will to unmaking" (1987: 92), the unifying endeavors of these Baudrillardian interpretations become a logical impossibility.

As critical literature on the film has frequently based its analyses on Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, it has not been in a position to treat the relationship between the heterogeneous elements adequately. Whereas the film offers a solution to the problem of simulation, Baudrillard believes that there is none. On the contrary, it has been shown that the film is a postmodern pastiche of bits and pieces, an assemblage of a heterogeneous space of allusions and that the references to Baudrillard are but one example.

The analyses presented here have elucidated that the combination of different elements also allows a wealth of connections to converge toward the establishment of an overall interpretation that accounts for the diversity of cultural fragments the film touches upon.

It has thus been demonstrated that *The Matrix* can be conceived of as an allegory representing the distinct and contrasting modes of discourse that have come to define both culture and aesthetic production in late capitalist society. All in all this analysis elucidates that the Wachowskis' movie is a comprehensive reflection of postmodern culture at the conclusion of the twentieth century. As a portrayal of humanity subjugated by machines and forced outside their traditional, secure, position of power, *The Matrix* provides a means by which the constitution of the postmodern technological sublime[7] can be considered.

Whereas it is questionable to suggest that *The Matrix* actually has political radical potential and may inspire some viewers to organize or revolt against capitalist systems – as P. Chad Barnett has argued (2000: 372) – at the very least, the film succeeds at "getting their audience to *think*, something that is far too uncommon in the conventional Hollywood product" (Felluga, 2003: 84). The ultimate strength of the film, its suggestive and evocative power, does not reside so much in its central thesis – "what we experience as reality is an artificial virtual reality generated by the matrix, the megacomputer directly attached to all our minds" (Žižek, 2002: 264) – but in its central image of the millions of human beings leading claustrophobic lives in water-filled pods, kept alive in order to generate the energy for the Matrix.

Thus, when people awaken from their immersion into the Matrix reality, this awakening is first accompanied by the horrible realization of this enclosure, "where each of us is effectively just a fetus-like organism, immersed in the prenatal fluid" (*ibid.*). The shocking effect triggered off by this realization resemble

> the miserable position of human as the self-reflective allegory of the very position of the cinema viewer: Are we all not, when we sit in the cinema, in the position of humans in *The Matrix*, tied to chairs, immersed in the spectacle run by a machine? (Žižek, 2002: 264)

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[7] Frederic Jameson's description of the postmodern, or technological sublime, illustrates the unrepresentability of the world system. His version of the sublime places the human subject in a multinational capitalist system that is unknowable. To comprehend the postmodern sublime, the individual must experience some functional "cognitive map," that offers an allegorical representation of postmodern space. According to Jameson, the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, and the Frank Gehry House do this remarkably well.

The utter passivity of humans in *The Matrix* renders tangible the notion that we are ultimately instruments of some intelligent machines that are beyond our knowledge and/or control.

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IS THERE AN EXIT FROM "VIRTUAL REALITY?" GRID AND NETWORK – FROM *TRON* TO *THE MATRIX*[*]

ELIE DURING

Abstract

The Matrix trilogy is both a philosophical machine and a powerful myth. Much of the mixed feelings or outright contempt with which it was received by many "intellectuals" is a direct result of the failure to understand this. This essay aims to show the kind of theoretical effects the film can achieve if one focuses on the main challenge *The Matrix* puts forth: the nature of the virtual. It uses the question whether there is an exit from "virtual reality" as a metaphor to understand virtual reality in opposition to the tantalising discourses on the "virtualisation" of the real. It gives up metaphysics in favour of a genuine pragmatics of the virtual, which is oriented towards concrete procedures and operations. In a more literal sense, the essay analyses different pictures and notions of the virtual as they appear in the tradition of science-fiction movies. In many respects *The Matrix* can be viewed as a counterpoint or an indirect answer to the problems already raised by *Tron* in 1982. The contrast between these two films is very instructive: it exposes the evolving nature of the aesthetical and philosophical challenges posed by simulated environments. It also emphasises the originality of *The Matrix*'s approach to the by now classical science-fiction theme of a complete simulation of reality. In this respect this essay suggests two main hypotheses: (1) that the network has become the paradigm of the virtual (cf. the importance of telephones); (2) that the virtual must be considered in terms of time, rather than space (cf. the idea of "Bullet-Time").

Together with a few other philosophers I suggested treating *The Matrix* as a "philosophical machine" (cf. Badiou et al., 2003). It has become clear, however, that the question of how to operate such a machine is far from self-evident. In general, the "professional philosophers" were unable to overcome

[*] Translated by Stefan Herbrechter

the confusion and the disappointment they felt about a film which, admittedly, is saturated with references to theory but which they treated first and foremost as an action movie, beautiful but inane at the same time: a cross between three well-known filmic genres: western, science fiction and kung-fu (cf. Knight & McKnight, 2003). Things become even more complicated by the fact that *The Matrix* is of course also a formidable commercial machine – a "franchise." Most intellectuals probably would have condoned a semi-ironic reading of an unknown Taiwanese B grade film, but to dare to speak seriously of a blockbuster whose target audience are teenagers more or less steeped in video gaming, was probably asking a bit too much of them.

Much could be said about the reception the film and its "associated products" have had. But one should first of all point out that what is distinctive about the "Matrix" machine is that it anticipates the active usage to which it gives rise. In a sense it was perfectly predictable that philosophy would return to this film. The philosophers who therefore did reconnect themselves to it could not assume the convenient position of someone who parasitically and dexterously turns the user function of a cultural product designed for mass consumption against itself. *The Matrix* does not lend itself to this kind of appropriation; instead it is the film that turns philosophy against itself ("a Kung-fu film projected onto Plato's cave," as we said before), thus forcing philosophy to either try out new moves or else remain silent.

The film was in fact conceived as a piece of both aesthetic and commercial software that functions interactively: it does not call for a judgment (according to any criteria of "taste"), nor for an interpretation (a rather boring procedure used by believers in hermeneutics and decipherers of all kinds), but instead asks for *active* engagement. Philosophy, as it happens, figured prominently among the contributions designed to follow on from the film in order to consolidate its *presence* within the cultural sphere. The opening of a "philosophy" section on the Warner website containing a list of very respectable authors (even though exclusively from the ranks of "analytical philosophy"), was a very clear indication of this.[1] Besides, journalists were very eager to report that Baudrillard himself had been "contacted" and asked to participate in the conception of the film (which proves the directors' farsightedness), which was certainly not merely part of Warner's marketing strategy. In any case, philosophy, from the beginning and probably as never before, was called upon by the film. It was this

[1] See the "Philosophy" section on the official *Matrix* website (http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com) with contributions from Colin McGinn, Hubert and Stephen Dreyfus, David Chalmers, James Pryor, and others.

situation that offered the opportunity to investigate the conditions that regulate any philosophical engagement with non-philosophical cues (During & Maniglier, 2004).

Nevertheless, the question whether it is possible to write about *The Matrix* without more or less participating in its commercial strategy is of very limited interest. It generally only leads to lamentations about "cultural industries" and the "commodification" of philosophy which are the daily bread of public intellectuals. It is far more interesting to ask how philosophy was able to get caught out by a film, that is to say activated and put in motion by it. The task would then be to find in the very heterogeneity of these non-philosophical cues for philosophy the conditions for an *experiment* of a very specific kind.

This is what we wrote in this respect in the introduction to *Matrix, machine philosophique* (2003): "To connect to *The Matrix*, all the while continuing to do philosophy, is not to use a popular film as a pretext to dish up once more ideas already formed elsewhere in relation to other material. It means to engage with an operation that is already effectively at work. *The Matrix*: it *functions*. This must be the starting point which introduces a kind of gap into one's own philosophical practice and which leads further than whatever could have been achieved without an encounter between the two. *The Matrix* suggests theoretical trails through its own narrative and fictional constraints. One can exploit these and achieve philosophical effects through them provided one prioritises an interest in the functioning and the operations at work within the entire "machine" of the film rather than in its explicit or implicit philosophical content... ."

But why *The Matrix* rather than any other film, one may ask? Precisely, because this film is a machine, and a machine of a specific kind, a sufficiently "textured" machine that provides a sufficient number of "holds" (in the sense rock climbers would use the word "hold") for theoretical operations of very diverse kind, namely in relation to metaphysics, aesthetics, technics or politics. To put it differently, there is only one reason that justifies that philosophers should write a book about *The Matrix* rather than about any B grade film, or any other "philosophising" film (like for example *2001, A Space Odyssey*), and that is its popular success, or more precisely, the fact that *The Matrix* is a mass product that in effect *functions* (not only in terms of investment returns but also with respect to the very reception the film encourages), and which functions by provoking a massive philosophical – that is to say a necessarily *heterogeneous* – demand.

It is obvious that the film is philosophically not coherent, and probably does not even want to be. Phrases like "indigestible stew" or "theoretical wish-wash" have been used to describe it. But it would have been more exact

to refer to it as a building site or an area of "*bricolage,*" in the sense that Lévi-Strauss used the term to describe myth. *The Matrix* is a heterogeneous machine which, like Deleuze's machines, constantly breaks down – a machine that functions by disseminating its effects in all directions, even towards philosophy whose commonplaces it visits and whose reactions it invites. And myth, as Lévi-Strauss reminds us, provokes thought: it shows how a problem is constructed and transformed as it becomes part of a semiotic mechanism, by taking its material from diverse symbolic systems folded one onto the other, and by masking their incompatibility, and thus turning heterogeneity into an advantage, so to speak, by making it a precondition for its functioning.[2] It is thus no longer a matter of explaining the "message" of the film, or of making explicit the "philosophy" it contains, but of discerning the principle on which it functions and to make this work in turn. The connections and operations that the film allows for have to be evaluated in relation to what they produce, in terms of the problems they permit to be posited anew, and with increased focus. For example, the problem of the virtual.

The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality – Or, How to Exit the Virtual?

This is a question that the film already formulates in its own way, both literally and allegorically. It will not have escaped anybody that the *Matrix* plot in fact has at its centre the metaphysical question of the essence of reality. The first episode strikes by its narrative coherence, which is reinforced by the messianic theme and the missionary spirit of the Nebuchadnezzar crew. The dividing line between reality and the virtual seems clear; one merely has to find an exit or pass, as in an old Western. *Matrix Reloaded*, on the other hand, shares a number of characteristics with *Star Wars*, Borges' literature of the fantastic, or Castaneda's quest of initiation, by mixing vision and magic, shamans and demons, in a labyrinthine illusion. In addition to machines and digital police officers, one now has to reckon with an ex-agent transformed into a virus and a whole population of exiled programmes with frightening powers, who seem to have stepped out of an altogether different story: angels, ghosts, vampires, even werewolves. The Oracle's words are less clear than ever, the prediction that turned Neo into a new prophet starts looking less probable, and finally all the boundaries begin to get blurred and, in particular the one that provided the

[2] Patrice Maniglier has developed this hypothesis of the mythological structure of *The Matrix* (in "Matrix, machine mythologique," in Badiou et al., 2003).

core of the argument in the first film, which puts into stark contrast the collective illusion constructed by the Matrix against a rough and solid, but quite undesirable, reality. Below this dividing line one discovers an underworld or intermediate world with an absurd topology, full of short cuts and secret passageways. It is thus not enough to have slipped, like Alice, behind the looking-glass, but one also needs the right keys and to know who to trust. Agent Smith and Neo exchange their powers, the former downloading himself into the mind of a member of the resistance, and the latter stopping machines from a distance so that one starts to wonder whether Zion itself is not actually only a sub-sphere of the Matrix (or of a kind of "Metamatrix"), specially conceived to uphold the illusion among the inveterate of a possibility to exercise their true freedom: a "blue" Matrix at the heart of the "green" Matrix – or the other way round. It is no longer reality against appearance: as the frontier between the two starts dissolving, it really feels like being caught inside a simulacrum. In this sense, the third instalment of the trilogy seems a little removed with regard to the daring speculative hypotheses suggested in *Reloaded*. The intermediate worlds and the intermediary spaces, like for example the underground station Mobil Avenue (an anagram of "limbo"), are left unexplored. The essential part of the plot is focused on the decisive attack on Zion and the final mechanical-political pact made between Neo and the machines. The war scenes and the political storyline almost make one forget the wonders of the metaphysical plot.

Whatever the relative merits of the three episodes, the plot was of course too simple and too naive in the eyes of those who took *The Matrix* literally and were thus expecting a *direct* problematisation of the questions concerning simulation. Of course, this "desert of the real" that Morpheus puts to Neo, citing Baudrillard (much to the pleasure of all those who managed to capture the allusion), was originally not supposed to designate any firm reality behind appearance, but rather the deserting or the sublimation of the real itself, or the indistinguishability of these two levels, the complete covering over of the real by its sign, which finally dismisses the real altogether. The reference to one of the pillars of "French Theory" was thus based from the outset on an outright misunderstanding. Even the second film could not find favour with the philosophers, for to suggest an indefinite stacking of simulations one inside the other still means to be inside ideology; it means to acknowledge the pertinence of an idea of the Real, which would be like the reverse side or the horizon, the "real" yet unattainable limit of an infinite play of reflections.

In short, the accusation put to the film was to mobilise the prestige of a *mise-en-scène* full of special effects to transform into a *visible* fantasy what

by definition cannot be said or shown: the inconsistency of "reality," the point at which every system of symbols and rules turns out to be fundamentally insufficient, incomplete, hollow. According to the Lacanian axiom, the point of the Real is also the moment when representation goes astray. The mistake was thus to turn this situation into an action film and to insinuate a tangible and almost literal representation of it: the waste world behind the Matrix, criss-crossed by machines, and a subterranean Jerusalem as the rallying point of all the heroes of the "Real" (according to William Gibson's phrase in his foreword to the *Matrix* script) – or else, but *which actually comes down to the same*, the vertigo of two simulations which echo each other. As a careful reader of Lacan and Philip K. Dick, Slavoj Žižek explains that it would have been more entertaining to multiply the realities themselves, rather than to stack up levels of virtuality in a nostalgic longing for the Real. He accuses the Wachowski brothers of not having understood that the Real is not a "true reality" behind simulation, nor its mirage at the edge of an infinite series of simulations, but the *void* as a result of which every reality seems incapable of enclosing itself and is bound to undo itself (Žižek, 2002). As for Baudrillard, who is known to have been quite concerned about the use the film makes of his ideas, he sees in the whole affair a misunderstanding at work which rather confirms his ideas about the implacably specular (and spectacular) logic that informs Hollywood industry. The "simulation," as he understands it, is in no way a specific register of illusion (nor a futuristic version of it – its fanciful "hypersimulation"), but the condition in which we already find ourselves when appearance has entirely *replaced* the real. From this point of view *The Matrix* cannot but appear to be an entirely *imaginary* representation of simulation ("the film about the Matrix that could have been produced by the Matrix," as Baudrillard wittingly explains in a French magazine). This proves even truer for *Reloaded* and the entire virtual circuit it puts forward. Just like Disneyland in Baudrillard's rhetoric, this excess of images and deception is another attempt not to make us despair of reality, to persuade us that it still exists.[3] The final scene of *Revolutions*, which has provoked such diverse commentary, again seems to confirm this idea even though in a rather ambiguous way: one discovers that there is, after all, a new version of the Matrix, an "upgraded" one, with clear blue skies and a rainbow to boot.

[3] I have tried to elaborate this in "Trois figures de la simulation" (in Badiou et al., 2003).

The Pragmatics of Virtual Reality

But what does the film really show for those who are prepared to demonstrate a little good will and who are attentive to the unique montage that the story proposes? It suggests precisely that one should start by reformulating some of the questions that are otherwise too vast (e.g. Is a simulated life morally acceptable? Is there a difference between true "reality" and virtual "reality"?), by moving them onto the terrain where they might actually be resolved in practice, that is to say in action, within the frame of a possible narration. The badly drawn concepts of "reality" and "virtuality" might then themselves be reworked in a way that makes them directly available for describing an event, a gesture or an operation.

For example: how to download an "avatar" of one's body into the Matrix (i.e. the problem of the telephone)? What is the place of the real body in a machine of total simulation (i.e. the problem of the "bioport")? What function does freedom of choice have in an interactive simulation (i.e. the problem of the Architect)? Etc.

Those who are most inclined to denounce *The Matrix* as a naive and literal illustration of the idea of simulation are also the very people who make the least operational use of this very idea. As a result of simulation being thought of beyond the simple opposition between reality and deluding appearance, it ends up being completely separated off the concrete mechanisms of simulation where its idea could effectively have some meaning: it almost does no longer function as a concept at all but rather as an encompassing ontological category that is supposed to summarise our relation to things *in general*. The scholastics would have called it a "transcendental." However, the film does not pose a problem of general ontology: the question is not to know what exactly the virtual is, what its nature or substance is, nor is it about finding the most general categories that allow one to characterise its inconsistency (or its lack of substance), but rather it wants to indicate processes, distinguish functional levels that are related to specific situations and problems. These can be technological (e.g. what topology suits the virtual?), moral (e.g. what to do if reality is less desirable than its simulation?), political (e.g. how to prepare an alliance with the machines?), and even, why not, metaphysical (e.g. can the laws of nature be bent, and what distinguishes dream from hallucination?).

Let us come back to the question, *How to exit the virtual*? This question has a very concrete sense in the film; and, interestingly, it is connected to a technical concern, namely how to *enter* the Matrix. One could say that, paradoxically, it is by looking for an entrance that one manages to exit "the

virtual," to extract oneself from these floating discourses that make of the virtual an all-encompassing and thus inoperative category ("as big as a hollow tooth," Deleuze would have said).

Through what passage does one enter the virtual? Which entry, which drop-off point? And, first of all, *where* is the Matrix? Does this question make sense at all? The term "cyberspace," made popular by William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), irresistibly suggests the image of a sphere that would be like a virtual extension or prosthesis of reality, a free zone where everyone could live out one's dreams or nightmares. Yet describing the Matrix as a form of collective hallucination, by reducing it to the extensionless, purely spiritual representations of a "brain in a vat" (a reference to Hilary Putnam's famous parable), is not fundamentally different from projecting the Matrix onto an ethereal domain, as the imaginary "stage" or "locus" of illusion itself, a kind of legendary landscape with its special shape and topography. Whether the picture is in the head, like a "mental" image, or superimposed onto reality, like its ideal extension in "cyberspace," in both cases the virtual is apprehended according to the categories that suit reality and is thus immediately reduced to a thing, either mental or physical, unextended or extended. It is this commonplace against which the philosophical critique speaks out, all the while being unable to resist the temptation to demonstrate it everywhere in turn.

The interest of *The Matrix* lies in suggesting something different. In particular, that the questions concerning virtual space and its geography are inseparable from the apprehension of time. This is the conclusion to be drawn from the special effect of temporal anamorphosis called "Bullet-Time," which shows tangibly that the experience of virtual reality (the virtual as experience) is above everything else a singular experience of duration which it is difficult to express through a metaphysical relation between original and copy, a thing extended in space and its immaterial representation in the mind. Henceforth, the virtual has to be thought in relation to time rather than space. It is not so much a question of reproduction (falsification or simulation) but of speed (whence the importance of martial arts in the film, which are far from being merely decorative). There is therefore no need to choose between pure hallucination which would only have a mental existence (i.e. virtual images as the result of physical stimuli), and a "cyberspace" which would only reduplicate the physical mechanism of simulation within an ideal but contiguous space (i.e. the neural architecture of the brain, electrical signals and networks of electrodes connected to a central computer or "mainframe"). The Matrix is neither *in* the head nor is it located *in* the wasteland of 2199. The Matrix is a psycho-technical site, neither internal nor external. It is the interface between human and machine. In this sense it is the primitive

institution, or the first organ of a "mechano-politics" that remains to be invented (this is what is at stake in the alliance between Neo and the machines) in order to guide humans towards a new stage of their becoming. The entire meaning of this *Bildungsfilm* is to make the Matrix acceptable and likeable. The Matrix is what is best for humans provided they know how to use it, or put differently, how to develop new powers through it. "One does not know what a body can do," Spinoza said. This is a question of speed.[4]

And if, despite all this, one should insist on apprehending "virtual reality" in spatial terms, one has to acknowledge that its topology is in no way obvious. It is a stratified, many-layered reality. The whole question is exactly that of being able to recapture the functioning of simulation through frameworks that reflect the different layers of articulation (i.e. the mechanical infrastructure, the syntactical layer of operations, the phenomenological layer of the virtual world proper). For one does not travel in the virtual by simple teleportation, as for example in *Star Trek*.

The pragmatics of virtual reality implemented in the film, however, often proves more insightful than the kind of dialectics suggested by the metaphysicians of simulation.

Two Versions of the Virtual: Tron *and* The Matrix

However, in order to exit the virtual, one first needs to know where one comes from. One has to chart the territory already covered, from the first stammerings of infography and "computer generated images" to the kind of "virtual cinematography" that John Gaeta, the special effects director of *The Matrix*, stands for. What is needed is an archaeology of cinematographic representations of the "virtual," of which digital technology is but the latest avatar. In this essay I can only touch on a few aspects that may clarify my general purpose.

Returning to *Tron* (1982) one cannot help but be struck by the directors' predilection for iridescent globes suspended above endless chequerboards and, more generally, for the multiplication of simple geometrical, preferably polygonal, forms, either in rotation around an invisible axis, or grouped like swarms or clouds, or else projected into the void like light particles. They make one think of Lucretius' atoms, or of the

[4] I am indebted to Thomas Bénatouïl's idea of narrative (in Badiou et al. 2003). Duncan Chesney emphasises this "Spinozist" aspect in his review (2004). I believe that this Spinozist reading is compatible with the Bergsonian account of duration which, as I would suggest, is the key to a proper understanding of the virtual as genuine *experience*.

polygons in Plato's *Timaeus*. The chequerboards that extend as far as you can see suggest a slightly kitsch analogy with the infographic frame itself – the pixellated matrix whose combination gives rise to a whole world. There is also a kind of vortex, with heights and depths symbolised, as on a geographical map, by a network of more or less spaced out lines depending on the area covered. The entire "low-tech" imagery reminds one of Vasarely or of the illustrations to be found on certain physics or maths textbooks even today. But this is something else than a mere inclination towards geometric formalism: it is a veritable mannerism which like any mannerism tries to stage its own procedures. The fractal objects thus suggest an allegory or a tangible representation of the creative powers of algorithmic operations. One also remembers an extraordinary scene where the trajectory of motorbikes launched at high speed solidifies into walls which transform into strangleholds or kinetic labyrinths for the opponent.

To exit the virtual, first of all, means to break from the formalist or figurative imagery of the beginnings of the synthesis between image and computer, to renounce the emblems, the entire naive heraldry of this geometrical imaginary; but it also means to break with the kind of thinking about the virtual for which this imaginary merely provides a colourful attraction. The mannerism of a film like *Tron* is in fact complicit with an entire conception of the virtual. Parallel to the evolution of styles determined by technological innovation, the development of methods of modelling has modified the very idea of simulation in the past twenty to thirty years. *The Matrix* is located at the end of this process and follows on from a few other films in this respect (those by Cronenberg for example, from *Videodrome* to *eXistenZ*, but also *Total Recall, Johnny Mnemonic*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, and *Dark City*), and from some well-known books (Daniel Galouye's *Simulacron Three*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and most of all those by the master himself, Philip K. Dick). In short, one could say there has been a development from simulation as a production technique of artificial forms to the idea of a complete simulation of the real. The virtual realm is no longer a crude and rough version of our own, nor an exotic construction which displays its fictional character through an excess of ingenious devices. It is by the way no longer *one* virtual world alongside others, but a virtualisation of *the* world itself, the double of the real world, virtually indistinguishable from it. A perfect and discrete simulation which hides its own machinery (simulation, as Deleuze reminds us in *Logic of Sense*, is nothing else but "the phantasm itself, the effect of the functioning of the simulacrum as machinery – a Dionysian machine" [Deleuze, 1990: 263]). The entire problem of *The Matrix* lies here, and that is why exiting (or entering) the virtual is no longer self-evident at all. The question, briefly stated, is not so much to tell the real

from the virtual, but rather to know *where* to find the latter. It is a matter of learning how to enter and exit a machine.

One can start measuring the trajectory of the past twenty years. We left the "world of syntheses" behind whose baroque appearance was meant to imitate the infinite creative power of the mathematical model. *The Matrix* develops the consequences of a hypothesis already formulated in science fiction literature, namely that of a complete and (almost) perfect simulation of reality. The "low tech" form of representation which characterised *Tron* (a mannerist simulation that announces itself as such), is henceforth absorbed into the very contents of the representation: black Bakelite retro telephones, a Fifties television set, a dark abandoned building, portraying an imaginary that evokes *Batman* and *Blade Runner*. As if to remind us through tiny hints that simulation is something that may also be cobbled together from scraps. Simulation is not an singular condition; like softwares, it comes in more or less upgraded versions. In fact, the simulated real sometimes contains little glitches that raise the alarm: one thinks of the scene of "*déja vu*" in the first episode which shows a cat passing through twice in an identical manner, right under Neo's eyes, at the very moment when the agents are manipulating the code of the Matrix in order to wall up the windows of the building. Another important difference with typically eighties renderings of simulated realities is that the virtual occurs no longer in the magical spectacle of immaterial and immaculate forms. Only those scenes in which the Matrix code is directly visible constitute an example of a literal reappearance of the digital infrastructure, and more precisely still, of the symbolic substratum of simulation. Hence the green code that runs down the screen during the credits and which also figures on the control screens in the Nebuchadnezzar, or in Neo's vision in the final scene of the first *Matrix*, when the three agents appear in green watermark, like pure programmes created by the Matrix. The symbolic essence of the Matrix can still be figurative, as shown in these examples, but only as it would appear to someone who would not be immersed in it, who would thus envisage simulation from the outside, from the "real" (like Tank in front of his screens), or else, only as it would appear from inside the Matrix to someone who managed, by some kind of double vision, to pick up the code and the sequence of conventional rules under the shimmering surface of simulacra (this power that Neo develops corresponds symmetrically to the one of the rebels who are so used to deciphering the flow of symbols that they directly "see" their meaning so to speak, by immediately interpreting the stream of digits and graphemes into forms, objects or movements). The green code symbolises or *signals* that there is simulation, while suggesting that trained people can literally see through it. It corresponds to the perfect covering of a technically expressed form (the

synthetic image produced by the computer) by a form of technical content (because this time it is in fact the digital artefact that needs to be represented as such). It also poses the central question: where is Neo? What is his point of view when he thus perceives from within what strictly speaking can only be the Matrix' "exterior" aspect, its rough digital texture? How can that which is coded perceive the code itself? This paradox could be named the "point of view of the Architect."

Most of the time, however, the virtual does not appear as such. It does not confine itself to digital flux of an immaterial nature; on the contrary, it has a veritable, dense and rough materiality which cannot be reduced to mere effects of texture (in the Matrix the blows really cause one to bleed, which is the first lesson Neo receives during his apprenticeship). It presupposes in fact a whole machinery (which is not the same as a model or a digital pattern). This is exactly why the problem arises of how to insert oneself into the Matrix, how to work one's way through to its machine room, so to speak. It is quite interesting to contrast the entry and exit scenes of *Tron* and *The Matrix* in this respect.

In *Tron*, the hero enters the universe of the video game by literally being "digitalised" by a powerful light beam directly aimed at him. He is thus reduced to small cubicles to be reassembled elsewhere in the game console. The complex machinery we are made to see only has one function, namely to "scan" the body of the hero line after line and reconstitute its virtual double who will eventually materialise as an assemblage of pixels. This operation has three characteristics: first, it is entirely reversible – in the end, the hero reappears in the real as if nothing had happened. The light beam redraws his body in real space, line after line, to an extent that one wonders whether the directors merely played their tape backwards. Second, in both cases it is the machine that captures and reconstitutes the body – the procedure does not require any particular skill, it is entirely automated, one merely has to let it happen. Finally, the hero is absorbed into the video game involuntarily, by mistake. This is a far cry from the hackers of *The Matrix* who deploy a great deal of ingenuity in order to infiltrate the works of simulation and who never take the same route twice, so to speak. *The Matrix* puts forward a much more archaic version of this double process of virtualisation and materialisation: the metallic "bioports" located at the back of the neck are not fundamentally different from this point view to the jelly-like and vaguely pornographic "pods" in *eXistenZ*. They function, by the way – and I will come back to this – only when interfaced with good old twentieth-century telephone "land" lines.

There is a very different conception about passing between reality and the virtual at work in these two films. But they probably also no longer share

the same conception of simulation either. *The Matrix,* as we suggested, runs counter to two current misconceptions about the virtual: the "realist" (or imaginary) which understands the virtual as a kind of subtle ethereal territory, a synthetic environment conceived as a simple extension of our ordinary reality, and in which it seems possible to move around as if one were travelling towards some far destination; and the "idealist" (or symbolic) idea which represents the virtual as a kind of structure or intelligible model that may be fleshed out in various ways but is digital through and through and thus purely ideal. It is true that the very idea of simulation presupposes symbols combined according to the rules of a syntax which, by providing a functional equivalent of the relevant characteristics of the reality to be simulated, necessarily suggest a fundamentally abstract mode of representation (regardless of its abundance of detail and the power of illusion). But one is not compelled to think of "functions" in terms of unchangeable essence. As a matter of fact, the model as understood in modelisation techniques is best characterized by its capacity to evolve and its adaptability. In *The Matrix* the functional space visualised by the green code running down the screen operates less like a grid than as an elastic framework that can be as rigid or flexible as needed within the limits the programme determines. The motif of the chequerboard is thus merely the most basic form of the simulation scheme, because the functional space is in fact as varied and differentiated as one may wish. It can be folded, crumpled, and it is in folding upon itself that it constitutes objects that subsequently only need to be filled out by adding some new parameters (e.g. colour, luminosity, texture, etc.). This is the suppleness exploited by Neo while learning to fight, the suppleness apparent in the background of every scene, when the whole pavement undulates as the hero lands to the ground after flying around the city, or when Morpheus pompously states the basic rule of the Matrix: that one merely needs to "bend" (rather than break) the laws of nature, that one should perceive them as mere nodes of virtuality rather than necessary, inflexible dictates of the universe's "mainframe."[5]

On the whole, one might be tempted to say that *The Matrix* proposes a "realist" version of simulation while *Tron*, enhanced with its fluorescent colours, puts forward an "idealist" one. But things are a little more complex. There rather seems to be in both cases a specific combination of two meanings or two aspects of simulation: the Matrix as grid, coordinate system or operator (i.e. the matrix in its mathematical sense), and the Matrix as organic container (i.e. the matrix in its biological sense). If one prefers, the

[5] Cf. David Rabouin's "energetic" approach to symbolism in "Le Tao de la Matrice" (in Badiou et al., 2003).

Matrix as model, and the Matrix as texture. *Tron* displays the artificial nature of its constructions, it everywhere verges on the model, hence the omnipresent chequerboards and the ubiquitous geometrical forms and transformations. On the other hand, *The Matrix* makes the setting ripple like supple fabric; it emphasises at every level the elastic, fluid and even liquid quality of the Matrix. But these two aspects are in fact inseparable. Learning about the plasticity of the body in fact mirrors the watermark vision of the green or golden code, but also the fine exploration of the topology of the virtual world, that is to say the plasticity of the network itself. Thus the image which is appropriate for the new idea of the virtual is less that of an illusionist *trompe-l'oeil* (or the cinematographic machine) than that of the undulating "web" of the internet. The development from *Tron* to *The Matrix* is from the idea of the grid to that of the network.

To enter and exit the virtual within such a configuration presents very specific difficulties. These difficulties stem directly from the first hypothesis, namely that of the existence of a complete simulation of reality, along with the network as the technical form that corresponds to such a state of affairs. But what remains there to be seen once the simulacrum is perfect? How to find one's way through "the desert of the real?" *The Matrix* suggests two answers to this quandary. On the one hand, it displays a topology of the virtual which is of direct relevance to matters of orientation and navigation within the simulated world (entering and exiting takes place in the tangible representation of the Matrix's infrastructure, starting with the network of "land line" telephone sets); on the other hand there is a choreography indicating in an oblique way how it would feel to develop a vision of the virtual as such, a perception from within the folds of simulation (hence the "Bullet-Time" effect).

Telephones

What distinguishes a film like *The Matrix* from other films that deal with the same topic is that it makes one see how the real and the virtual are set out *in practice*, not in the terms of an imaginary topology where reality and simulation are always conceptualised, whether intended or not, as two distinct but adjacent "worlds." As a result, the problem of illusion, the subjective anxiety provoked by the faltering of appearances and the shaking of certainties (which is the central theme of films inspired by Philip K. Dick's work) move to the back stage. Once the relation to simulation is treated in an "objective" way, it can be transposed onto concrete problems of navigation and cartography. This approach naturally suggests theoretical hypotheses

about the infrastructure of the Matrix and the kind of beliefs and narrative schemes it authorises. The question is no longer what the Matrix *is,* but how it works, and more specifically, how to intervene in and how to exit from it. In this connection, the technical device that underlies the simulation plays an essential role. It is that which makes *The Matrix* part of the technology-driven action film genre (like for example *Mission Impossible*) and more generally of science fiction, which, of course does not merely rely on futuristic technology and the exploration of unknown worlds but also demands that the protocols of experience should not be arbitrary but always rationally explainable. The use of telephones, the insistent emphasis on either analogue ("hard-wired") or cellular (satellite-controlled) devices, as well as on the physical network of telephone land lines visualised on the control screens, makes it possible to reveal *the edge of* virtual reality by focusing on its connection points. Elsewhere I have analysed the precise (and by no means trivial) function of the telephones in *The Matrix* (cf. Badiou et al., 2003). Here, it must suffice to give merely a general idea.

The telephone, it must be emphasised, is not just a sporadic instrument, it is present throughout the entire trilogy. Right from the first sequence of the first episode one witnesses Trinity communicate with the rebels through her mobile phone and then diving into a telephone box that a lorry is going to crush a moment later, just after she has dematerialised. After that, it is Neo, the Hacker, who is woken up by the ringing of his telephone set, and later contacted by Morpheus on a Nokia mobile delivered in a FedEx envelope. And soon after, Morpheus is himself on his mobile or walking slowly towards an analogue black Bakelite phone with an old-fashioned dial that occupies almost the entire screen. The mobile of Cypher, the traitor (who made the choice to return to the Matrix for good and thus no longer needs to communicate), lands in a bin, in a slow motion sequence reminiscent of De Palma. This switched on mobile will eventually allow the agents to locate the rebels. In the last few scenes of *The Matrix* one sees, successively, first Morpheus dematerialise by using a phone box in an underground station, then Neo snatching a mobile off a passer-by in order to signal to the rebels where he is, and then running towards the telephone in room 303 before being shot by Agent Smith. What is important in these scenes is not the content of the conversations, nor the symbolism of the telephones as such (the vivid presence of the human voice in a world that is entirely artificial, unless long distance communication merely signifies the imperative of mobility as the true spirit of new capitalism), but rather the particular *operations* implied by these varied usages of the telephone. During an "online" discussion, the Wachowski brothers admitted that they "liked the analog nature of older technology... [and] the suggestion of old original

phone hackers" ("Matrix Virtual Theatre," 1999). But how exactly does this work, beyond the stylistic effect? And what exactly is the difference between using mobiles or old analogue technology?

One only has to pay attention to the protocols shown in order to understand that the land line telephones are not a means of physical transportation (like for example the teleporters in *Star Trek* or in Ray Palmer's "The Silver Age Atom"), which would enable people to circulate along telephone lines after having been reduced to the quantum scale. They are also no direct means of communication – the mobiles perform this function very well and they are in fact what the rebels use to call their base when they are in the virtual Matrix. No, the hard wired telephone sets are used for *navigating* or *locating* purposes.

For the main problem of navigating in a virtual space lies in locating a virtual body ("avatar") or a virtual environment (a hotel room for example), in a way that does not merely rely on the topographical conventions of the simulacrum-world, nor on the purely syntactical or computational level symbolised by the green code running down the screen. In order to land on a specific point in the virtual world it is not enough to have a virtual map (nothing would be easier for the hackers to obtain a plan of the virtual telephone network); one rather has to find a way to determine the *point* at which one is. The issue is to know *where* to enter and also where this entry will lead to in the virtual world, "behind the looking-glass."

Let us attempt an analogy here: in contrast with a map of the underground which suggests an absolute or bird's eye view of the subterranean network (and which is hence purely relative for those who do not know where it is actually located), town maps are for purely local use; as these plans are in themselves barely useful to those who are unfamiliar with the surroundings, one occasionally sees a "you are here" added to help the visitors locate themselves and figure out the right orientation. In the case of virtual navigation the difference for those who are outside the virtual is that "here" can only be found blindly and at once – no real trial and error is possible before emerging at a specific point in the Matrix. It is somewhat like the situation for someone who is supposed to reach a destination by finding one's way through complete darkness using a plan that would give no idea about the point of departure. If one is outside the Matrix, calculation alone does not provide any direct entry point interpretable in terms of a virtual *place*. Consulting the cadastre of the virtual world or the layout of the telephone network will not help either because that would only provide a *relative* location, certainly useful for those inside the Matrix (like a town map, provided one knows how to orientate it in relation to a direction of reference), but which can provide no real or *absolute* access for those outside

it. The only solution to this problem of absolute locating is therefore to find an intermediary framework between the syntactical structure of the simulation and its virtual topography. This intermediary framework is precisely what the analogue telephone network provides; it plays the role of an interface that reduplicates the reticular functioning of the Matrix in a way that makes sense to people navigating in its vicinity. The telephone network is thus more than a grid or a coordinate frame in the geometrical sense: it offers a tangible representation or model of the network of the Matrix, it lays bare its topology. The telephones are thus indices or buoys in the ocean of the virtual.[6] Once again, one does not enter the virtual as one would enter a house: in order to do so one must trace marks on flowing water, that is, decipher fluctuating configurations of symbols which constitute the veins of the network, all the while avoiding the connections bugged by the agents of the Matrix. It should be obvious from these technical considerations that entering the Matrix and exiting it in time, at the right moment, already presupposes an entire skill of plasticity and synchronisation of durations.

"Bullet-Time"

What happens if we now tackle the question of the passage to the virtual in the "subjective" mode? Cronenberg played with the texture effects, and had his characters discuss the matter plainly. There is an interesting scene in *eXistenZ* where Ted Pikul asks: "Is that kind of transition normal? That kind of smooth interlacing from place to place?" And Allegra Geller, the notorious game developer, replies: "It depends on the style of game. You can get jagged, brutal cuts, slow fades, shimmering little morphs..." The Wachowski brothers have a different approach to the same problem. They tackle the fabric of time itself in order to suggest graphically an experience of the virtual at the limits of bodily and mind powers. Thus the extreme slow motion achieved by the process called "Bullet-Time," a complex and innovative technique which associates chronophotography (following Muybridge rather than Marey) and computer-generated images. "Bullet-Time is a stylistic way of showing that you're in a constructed reality and that time and space are not the same as [...] us today living our lives," as John Gaeta, special effects director of *The Matrix*, explains in the "bonus track" dedicated to this process on the DVD. To take a closer look at this: Trinity takes off and

[6] A more precise account of this rather intricate matter can be found in Badiou et al. (2003; see "Téléphones" in the index). The solution presented there is inspired by Peter B. Lloyd (2003).

remains suspended for a moment in mid-air to distribute a stunning kick; Neo on the roof of a building continues to fall backwards, for many long seconds, thus avoiding bullets shot at him from point blank range. In these scenes the slow motion is no longer a paradoxical and somewhat emphatic way of evoking extreme speed (like for example in Steve Austin's *The Six Million Dollar Man*), but rather serves to demonstrate the duration of a material perception which somehow slips into the trajectory or trail of a pistol bullet.

"Duration" is the correct term. Better than the filmic notions of movement and speed, this Bergsonian concept allows to seize what is at stake here. Because it is less a question of stasis or suspension of time – which is still a metaphorical way to express that something has stopped moving forward, that movement has frozen or slowed down – than a condensing of time itself, which already reveals the continuity that links within duration the movement of things and the mental or spiritual life of the subject. The subject is caught as in jelly, entangled in a thick infinitely dilated duration, while the eye of the camera circles around in arabesques, at high speed. What this effect suggests is not so much speed as such but a certain relation – a differential relation – between two speeds or two regimes of duration: it is less about Neo's physical prowess as it is about the becoming that drives him to the limits of "a duration more and more scattered, whose palpitations, more rapid than ours, dividing our simple sensation, dilute its quality into quantity" (Bergson, 2002: 187). Thus the mind being in harmony with bullet-time slows itself down to the limit-duration of instantaneity, that is to say of matter, homogeneous or pure, undifferentiated repetition, while the arching body accompanies this still movement. It is a movement of relaxation which, from a different point of view, suggests just the opposite: an extreme concentration, the kind of intuitive voyage at infinite speed evoked by the masters of martial arts (Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, allegedly had the strange gift of dodging bullets through simple rotation of his body and head). Referring to the use of slow motion in Vertov and Epstein, Deleuze speaks in his books on cinema of a "perception-image" which gives an insight into things themselves, a perception that is more than human, a molecular perception where objects are transformed into pure lines of speed. To come back to Bergson, this is where one recognizes the intensive threshold from which the movement (with its kinetic properties of speed and direction) can be redescribed as the mobile cut of an elastic duration, similar to the instant which is an immobile cut of movement. It is not a question of being "faster" than the bullet, or of equalling its movement on a purely physical level, but of coinciding with its duration, which thus becomes infinitely "slower," or more decontracted, than the concentrated mind. The greatest speed, just like extreme slowness, can equally represent the lowest

degrees of duration. The metal projectile which splits the air by following the ballistic laws is but a pure mechanical repetition in (spatial) homogeneity: the mind bent on an intuitive effort will always be more "rapid" than it.

Of course, "Bullet-Time" *shows* us this experience rather than just giving it to us. It provides the form or symbolic representation of it. The choreography, the filmic theatre with its various speeds draw the diagram of a differential relation between two durations (mind and matter). This intensive relation, imminently recaptured through degrees of tension and relaxation of an identical continuity of duration, constitutes an adequate model to think the relation to the virtual. A camera whirling around an almost petrified body, suspended in its fall. What slow motion scenes convey is the idea that one accesses the centre of the Matrix through sensing a continuity of interwoven durations. This experience of pure time is required in order to rid oneself of the stranglehold of the Matrix, in other words to overcome the opposition between subject and object, inside and outside, internal perception and external object, virtual image and the actual state of things. There are no such oppositions: the modes of existence of matter and spirit always lead one to different degrees of contraction or dilation of duration. This is why the laws of nature can be bent and made pliable and why the bullets seem to fly in slow motion in the warrior's eyes. It is the reason why the simulated world seems more "supple" than the real one. The last stage of gaining consciousness (for the story of *The Matrix* is, in its own way, a phenomenology of mind) consists thus of understanding that the real itself, if one seizes it "in duration," can turn out to be as supple as the Matrix. To put it into a single formula, the real is not fundamentally *distinct* from the virtual (or exterior to it), it only comes to be differentiated according to diverse rhythms and times of actualisation of the virtual.

It needed a kung-fu film in cyberpunk format and the latest achievements in "virtual cinema technology" to make us actually *see* this.

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Section Three:

Embodiment

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TECHNOFANTASIES AND EMBODIMENT

DON IHDE

Abstract

Technofantasies and embodiment takes up the theme of how movies like the *Matrix* trilogy play upon fantasy in a technological context and relate to the human sense of embodiment. The *Matrix* trilogy is related to its predecessors such as Plato's cave and the theatre of the mind, or *camera obscura,* which played the role of models for mind. Contemporary technologies are then used to explain some of the effects and implications for "mind" and embodiment in the *Matrix*. The conclusion is meant to suggest a different model of both technologies and "mind" than is usually taken for granted.

Fictions, whether written, staged, imagined, or made into movies, always call for a "suspension of disbelief." But there are degrees and styles of disbelief and I want to address some of these with respect to the *Matrix* trilogy. It all started with Plato and his wonderful anticipations of the movies in his allegory of the Cave. Of course, by today's standards, he was plagued by not having any hi-tech or anything even close to special effects. His "movie" was very lo-tech. His audience, the prisoners chained by the necks and immobilized on their benches, faced the cave wall, the *tabula rasa* or screen where the images would dance. Behind them was a fire – no projector or lens-mediated system – in front of which was a parapet along which the hidden operators would hold up copies of copies, that is a sort of shadow puppet of ducks and rabbits or whatever, whose shadows would then be cast upon the screen-wall. But, it was audio-video in a primitive sense, because he described how an echo system made the noises seem to come from the cast shadows. Now, according to this artifice, and because the prisoners had been there since birth, his audience was supposed to "believe" that *reality itself* consisted of the shadow-play upon the wall. Here – Plato wants us to believe – is no suspension of belief; this *appearance is reality*" in the belief of the prisoners. Plato, the inventor of the artifice, of course, knows better; he sees through the illusion and knows there is a very different hierarchy of realities

and will show us how to find these by the gradual journey out of the cave into the outer, sun-lit world. But Plato's thesis is an ancient analogue to that of the "Matrix" – could an actual, human, embodied being be fooled into thinking that the cave's illusions, in the Matrix "program," can produce "real experience"? Or, indeed take programmed experience for lifeworld experience?

The role I want to play is that of *phenomenological skeptic*, because I doubt that a total suspension of such belief is possible without a totally successful self-delusion. To try to demonstrate this, I will undertake several variations, first on the cave theatre, then on the later theatre of the mind which Descartes uses to update Plato, and then on to the *Matrix* trilogy. To "believe" Plato – or Descartes – or the *Matrix* – what you have to suspend is your own *embodiment.* So, we return to Plato's cave: his theatre, as noted, is an audio-visual one, shadows on the wall, echoes in the chamber, a sort of reduced or minimalist display compared to what the prisoner would or could see outside the cave. Of course this sort of simulation and modeling has always been part of any abstractive strategy which uses the simpler to try to illuminate the complex. But, with respect to embodiment, the prisoners themselves are not simply audio-video beings – they are fully "bodied" and the implicit recognition of this is indicated in the need for their orientation to be fixed, immobilized by chains. They *cannot* turn around, they are tactile and kinesthetically immobilized as if they were only forward-facing "eyes and ears." Of course, if they could turn around, they would immediately *see* the fire, the shadow-casting shadow puppets of ducks and rabbits, and realize, *perceive* in a *gestalt,* the causal situation of what produces what and thus confirm Plato's implicit metaphysics: whatever is more original is the cause of that which is dependent.

I would argue that so long as the prisoners are fully embodied and have the full range of sensory dimensions, and are aware of these as we all are, they simply cannot be fully fooled. Were I, as a prisoner, to try to turn my head, would I not realize I was being restrained? Would I not realize that, for example, by turning my eyes from side to side, even if my neck is chained, there is a multiplicity of a limited sort of perspectives? Would I not be suspicious regarding the constraint system itself? My point is that so long as we have full, multidimensional embodiment, the awareness of constraint itself defeats any full illusion.

There is trickery here, a trickery like sleight of hand where the mechanism which produces the trick tries to remain itself hidden. Magicians – including Plato – of course themselves know the mechanism; they themselves do not believe in magic. But then, unless one is very young, neither do most audiences! Could we do better than Plato? Technologically –

and I will claim psychologically – yes. For example we could do a hi-tech variation on the cave: a 3-dIMAX. Here, instead of ambiguous shadows on the wall, produced by an unfocused fire, we have full 3-d "images" moving around in front of us, maybe a shark with open mouth coming directly at us, or a flock of birds flying right by. Much more vivid, and surrounded by Dolby sounds. And, psychologically, Plato's captivity trick is not needed – we eagerly enter the theatre, willing to take our forward-oriented seats and can even move our heads since the surround-screen is so large its "illusion" is not hurt much by some head movement. But this is an improvement only by degree, since I was already outside and come in to be entertained and thus I already know something of the difference between the staged nature of the new theatre-cave.

And while this is a great leap in "realism" if you will, it is still not enough. Here the artifice of goggles reminds us of artifice, and even while watching and listening, if I stick my hand out to catch the "birds" they have no substantiality, and if I take off my goggles, the show turns to double-vision fuzziness. It is too easy to dispel the illusions. Both my sense of full embodiment, added to which I have the variation of outside of, versus inside of the theatre, keeps me from full suspension of disbelief. But, now we must turn backward not to antiquity, but to early modernity and a second variation upon a theatre of the *mind.*

The two best known early modern philosophers, John Locke and René Descartes, both used the same metaphorical device to describe a theatre of the mind – the *camera obscura.* This device, re-invented and used in the Renaissance mostly by artists, was known earlier by the Arabic philosopher, Al Hazen (1038) and was described in his *Optics.* And, the *camera obscura* can be said to simply be an optical version of Plato's cave with a few modifications. A dark room, *camera obscura,* has a small opening, by Locke's and Descartes' time it includes a lens, through which light enters. What is *outside*, whether a light itself, say the sun, or lighted objects, then casts an *image* on the opposite wall, Locke's *tabula rasa* – for movies a screen, for Plato the cave wall – *inside.* To see this image one either has to *be inside* looking at the image, or have a second opening to look onto the screen from the outside. The inside image, however, is "reduced" from three-dimensionality on the outside to two-dimensionality inside, and is, moreover, inverted. Thus, like Plato's shadows, copies of copies, the *camera* image "represents" or copies the outside material [lighted] object. This optically produced image or illusion or appearance is a bit of an improvement on Plato's shadows since it is colored, "isomorphic" or is clearer and more spatially correct, but still a mere image.

The most dramatic change, however, introduced by both Locke and Descartes, is to have re-interpreted the prisoner, the observer of the images. Both took the *camera obscura* as a model for the *mind itself.* The mind, the seat of awareness, is a sort of observer literally inside the camera, who looks at the images and this is what becomes "subjective experience," the experience of experiencing one's own *thoughts*, mental images and the like. "Objects," in turn, are what is *outside* the camera, analogues to Plato's outside-the-cave, "real" objects. Now, here comes the rub: the newly enclosed "subject" *cannot get outside the box, but is essentially always inside it.* Now it is this move which much more deeply makes the plot illusion of the Matrix what it pretends to be.

For early modernity and the optical version of appearance/reality, the *theatre of the mind* is itself the real, the epistemology and metaphysics of this model. Note what is implied: first, early modernity introduces embodiment to a *dualism* of body and mind. The body in early modernity is "mechanical" and itself lifeless; the mind becomes "subject" and is a sort of homunculus inside the [body] box. In parallel fashion, "external" reality, the objects outside the box, are material, but the images or representations inside the box are merely phenomenal, i.e., fleeting images and representations of the outside. Were this sustainable as the true description of reality itself, then the late modern leap to the Matrix version of the theatre of the mind would be simple. Instead of external objects casting the images upon the screen of the mind, it is a program which does so, whereupon clearly the homunculus subject *could take the program as experience.* But the *Matrix* trilogy has its characters slipping into and out of the program – the threat of course is for the program to eventually become *total,* the machine wins, humanity defeated, in another version of technology-as-Frankenstein.

With the Locke-Descartes theatre of the mind, does Plato get trumped? And how can I use my escape tactic by appealing to full embodiment here? The now separated body and mind pretends that even my tactility and kinesthesia are "sensations" merely caused by something external – my experience here is trapped "inside" and is "subjective." The device tries to persuade me that "I" am actually separated from my "body." My experience is not embodied.

It might seem, then, that I need a different tactic, so I shall try one. First, do the usual philosophical self-reflexive move: can Locke and Descartes be self-consistent with respect to their description? My answer is, "no!" Were *they themselves* to have consistently taken their version of the theatre of the mind *as reality,* and they themselves in the position described inside the box, *how could they ever think there is anything like "external" or outside reality?* Put another way, were they to have constructed this view of

knowledge within the limits of their own description, could they have developed any distinctions of appearance/reality or image/object? Again, "no." Of the two, Descartes was the most sensitive to this dilemma. And to make the story as short as possible, note that his answer was posed in terms of a sort of philosopher's "God." For the poor enclosed "subject" to know truly would require knowing that there is a correspondence between the theatre images – all he has – and "real" external reality, that which is outside." Without going into the complex set of arguments he developed, what emerges as the guarantee of correspondence is the ideal viewing of "God" who can *simultaneously see inside and outside the box and thus judge the correspondence between entity and representation.* I call this a "cheat code." It is not "God" who sees both inside and outside the box, but Descartes, because he is the one who has described, invented, the theatre of the mind himself. He is outside the camera and can at the same time see inside it and that is what constitutes the full metaphysical and epistemic situation. But, one does have to admit that the trick is almost good enough to prevent my first tactic of trying to turn around in the cave and thus revealing my captivity through the experience of full embodiment. For while there is a "copy" of an external object in the *camera,* the image, the homunculus observer inside is not fully a body; were the observer to be so, he/she could presumably turn around and look out the peephole instead of at the *tabula rasa* and see for themselves what was out there. Descartes has distracted us but, exactly like Plato, Descartes is the inventor of his own artifice.

But, the cheat code position *is itself a position, a situated position.* And recognizing that, I contend we are back *in the world* (since we never left it) with our fully embodied positionality and actional, full body movement. In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological sense, I find myself already outside myself *in the world.* Now we are closer to our entry into the Matrix world as well. As one final step before going to the movies, I will take a contemporary detour into a set of claims which might be equivalent to a "true believer" in a Matrix world. Hans Moravec has made something of an infamous reputation for himself and his fantasized robotry, by claiming that humans will someday (or even soon) download their minds into a computer. My question is: what kind of mind could be so downloaded? And my variant revolves around the phenomenological sense of embodiment: will I be able to download my body into a computer? And, in Moravec's sense, which would be harder to do? My guess is that by today's lights, downloading a human body into a computer might be thought to be more difficult than downloading a mind. But if this is a good guess, then it implies more about the late modern and still very "Cartesian" interpretation of mind than not. In early modern versions of dualism, mind is *immaterial* as mental substance, in contrast to a material

body. In late modern variations the question of immateriality has become ambiguous, but the escape clause is one which interprets the mind – still separable from body – as more like an information processor. Which, if it were, would make it a likely candidate for "downloading." But a body, even in late modern parlance, remains in some sense, material, and so it is harder to conceive of "downloading" something material.

Embodiment, particularly in its phenomenological sense, is clearly material, or one might say experiencing material. Again, Merleau-Ponty's sense is that "I am my body." And there is no sense of some immaterial "mind." This would make downloading very difficult indeed. And, embodiment is also situated and relational; it entails action, interaction. So, if I "am" my body and am, interactionally, "already outside myself" in the world then it equally becomes difficult to conceive of any total identity of image/reality. Here a nuanced difference between Plato and Descartes also emerges: Plato's prisoners can develop a doubt about the shadows by virtue of the difference between fully embodied self-awareness and the reduced presence of shadows; but the homunculus in the box presumably has no such experience because his/her body has itself been removed – but there is also then *no experience either of the outside.* Any difference is going to have to be strictly a matter of internal relations. It is only by virtue of the cheat code which must generate differences between inside and outside that any appearance/reality distinction could be made at all. And both Descartes and Locke employ this cheat code, albeit in slightly different ways.

One way Locke does it is by making distinctions between perceptions and imagination. Imaginations are supposed to be more vague, less robust, less clear than perceptions since – again in parallel to Plato's shadow theatre – imaginations are supposed to be pale "copies" of perceptions. *And if the model is that of the camera obscura, that is true.* The image on the wall of the obscura is always less well lit, less clear, and were one an artist doing a tracing inside one would find it hard to depict the full intensity of painting that which it images outside the camera. But only if one could compare these scenes, the internal and the external, could such a claim be made. The breaking of the early modern cheat code comes with the realization that I am already outside myself in the world. But even more radically, I would claim that imagination is *not* a copy of perception at all – while it can have some features of perception, it carries others which could be said to make perception a pale copy of the imagination! Even when imagining something as simple as a duck or rabbit, in imagination I can turn each into any color I want, including day-glow ones, make each grow or shrink, or even float them behind my head, characteristics which make perception seem quite restricted.

Put another way, concrete imagining has different structural features than perception (cf. Ihde, 1973).

However, the other side of what I am taking as an inadequacy of Locke's theory of imagination, is the indirect evidence that he is following his own model of mind, the *camera obscura,* to the degree that the model perhaps overdetermines the description he gives of the phenomenon, that is, his descriptions sound more like what one would see in a *camera,* than of a description from someone with a vivid imagination.

We began with Plato's cave-theatre 2400 years ago; then jumped to the early modern theatre of the mind, now 400 years ago. As we now come into our own time take note that both these theatres were artifices, but also "technological set-ups." Now, my take on these theatres is that each in its own way served as an *epistemology engine,* that is, the inventors each used their technological models as a metaphor for how we gain knowledge and how we have experience. In our last historical leap, those same features endure, but in relation to a changed technological set-up, a new theatre. And, it is obvious that the cinematic hi-tech of the *Matrix* trilogy is dramatically different from the crude shadow puppetry of Plato and the less than clear and distinct upside down images of the *camera obscura.* In both the antique theatres, it was easy to see – assuming the position of one in "cheat code" position where one could compare the image world with the day light world – that these theatres were such that all images are both dependent upon the "real" things which are their cause and sources, and are dimmer and poorer than these sources. The fiction of our late modern theatre, hi-tech cinema, is quite different: its implicit claim is that its image world can substitute for or replace the ordinary lifeworld – at least while plugged in. The prisoner of the new cave equivalent or the homunculus in the camera subject now has all experience shaped by the new epistemology engine, the Matrix program.

This new set of claims actually remain homologous to those of Plato and Descartes; but now that they remain situated differently technologically, they fit into a changed metaphysical context as well. There are, with the Matrix, "two worlds" as in the predecessor versions, in and out of the program. The connector, that dramatic plug which is inserted into the installed receptacle in the back of the head-neck, is the magic gateway between these worlds. And the question of which is appearance, which reality gets played back and forth as well. If the characters are going to do battle in the Matrix world, they have to be plugged in. But, once plugged in, then the action takes different shapes in the Matrix world. The martial arts, "Kung Fu," battles with Smith in all his multiplications, with flying interchanges, is the program world where the ordinary laws of physics are suspended. And it is the "world" about which we must most strenuously suspend our disbelief.

If, as I am contending, in this tradition, Plato-Descartes/Locke-Matrix, some technology or technology complex provides the model for knowledge and human experience, then in its latest incarnation we can expect a differently shaped theatre, and I believe the late modern adaptation of computerization, situated in proximity with that most "Cartesian" of late modern sciences, neurology and some versions of cognitive science, give us the clue for the popularization of this epistemology engine in the *Matrix* series. Descartes, in his earlier version, was indeed puzzled how a mind – the homunculus in the camera – could be connected to a mechanical body, and he theorized several versions of a "connector." One was a distribution of mind throughout the body, but the other localized connector he thought to be the *pituitary gland,* located in the middle of the brain. Today's version locates the connector in, or *as the brain.* But this mind is also different from Descartes. Today's brain, the homunculus's new version, is now an autonomous "computer" or "hard-wired" brain which de-codes "information" which comes in via the various sense organs (eyes, ears, tongue, fingers, etc). And if this is so, there is only a very small step between this notion of brain and the possibility of *The Matrix*. Or, reversing the metaphor, *The Matrix* is a cinematographic version of the latest epistemology engine: inner brain processing interacting with external data-code input.

The *Matrix* trilogy is simply a contemporary variant upon a very ancient set of human imaginations, imaginations which combine embodiment fantasies with some form of materiality, frequently *technological materialities.* This is why I call them *technofantasies.* One such fantasy, ancient, multicultural, possibly universal, is the fantasy of *flight.* But the ways in which humans fantasize flight also differs: some versions of flight entail types of mysticism – one leaves one's actual body and is transported somewhere – heaven, hell, astral regions, wherever. But, in many cases flight is accomplished through some kind of agency. Animal agency is common: one flies upon the back of some large bird, or a flying dragon, or a chimera, flying horse, etc. And, in still other cases a 'technology': a flying carpet, a machine, or other technological device. For the Greeks there is the story of Daedalus: Daedalus, a mythical inventor, who makes wings from feathers and wax, and although warned, his son, Icarus flies too close to the sun, melting the wax, and plunges to his death in the sea. Here is a technofantasy projection, which was simply not possible with poor technologies and no knowledge of aerodynamics. The flying fantasy is clearly ancient and Icarus's technology employed a flight machine which could not work. Why such a technology? Although I shall not pursue this here, I suspect that assisted-flight fantasies depend, in part, upon cultural lifeworld variants. Technology-assisted flight – in contrast to psychic- or animal-assisted flight –

may require greater familiarity with some greater machinic texture to a lifeworld. Lynn White, Jr., is famous for his histories of early technological developments in Europe from the very early through the high Middle Ages. The 13th century was particularly prolific: mechanical clocks had spread to town halls, cathedrals and clock towers. Large windmills, water wheels and donkey-driven cranes performed labour tasks which no longer depended upon human energy alone. Eyeglasses and other lens technologies were also widespread. Soon after, cannons replaced catapults and castles began to fall. All this was part of a much more mechanically textured lifeworld already in place before the Renaissance. And, as this mechanical proliferation began to be part of common experience, it also entered human thinking as a kind of epistemology engine: as early as 1270, Roger Bacon, the first European to write an optics, also began to make fantasy projections of imaginable technologies. He wrote about flying machines, armoured and self-propelled military devices, underwater vessels and the like. Bacon's age had already begun to be filled with technologies which stimulated his imagination. White points out that by the time clocks and eyeglasses and large-geared technologies were part of daily experience, the mathematician-ecclesiastic, Nicholas Oresmes (d. 1382), took the clockwork metaphor and applied it to the universe itself. Leonardo da Vinci, by the mid 1400s, was doing technical drawings, actually based on Bacon's verbal descriptions, of his odd screw-driven flying machine, many geared devices, a diving bell with a bubble-helmet (I have seen models of many of these in Vinci, Italy, his home town). Yet as all critical engineers know, virtually none would have worked! Just as wax and feathers, neither materials engineering, engine power, or aerodynamics was part of even this Renaissance scene. What I am hinting at is that in an already technology-familiar culture, fantasies can easily take such technofantasy forms.

Later attempts at actual technology-assisted human flight remain familiar, for example in early movie documentaries with all the funny jump-and-crash scenes portrayed. These were clumsy attempts to fulfill the fantasy, but by the mid-20th century new light weight materials and bicycle-like gearing showed greater promise. The 80s "Daedalus Project," both in 1987 and 1988, uses kevlar and mylar materials, an adjustable propeller bicycle gear driven and a trained athletetry to fly from Crete to Santorini, tracing Daedalus' and Icarus' itinerary. But minimal powered flight for a set of wings capable of supporting a human calls for 10 horsepower and the athlete puts out 0.4 horsepower and becomes exhausted and crashes onto a beach. Later, in 1996 and in ideal conditions, and competing for a $100,000 award to cross the English Channel, another athlete succeeds in a similar lightweight, bicycle-like powered machine. No danger in either of these

attempts of rising to the sun, and both barely make it, utterly exhausted. But it was a meeting of hi-tech materials, aerodynamic science, and ideal conditions for a "human-powered" flight, fulfilled in some sense, but hardly exemplifying the ease imagined by technofantasies. Literally or minimally, the fantasy was fulfilled, yet it never reaches bird-like quality.

Technofantasies include many sorts of desires, not only involving flying, but in general relating to technologies which will give us *powers* usually beyond our bodily, sensory, sexual, intellectual, or for that matter any or all dimensions of human embodiment. But while we imagine technologies which could do this, we also want them to be transparent, without effort, enacted with ease, as if our enhancements were part of a well trained "sports body." And this is the juncture at which we can also return to the late modern technologies which seem to promise us the materialization of just such a fantasy.

I contend that the technologies which aid in *Matrix-like technofantasies* are the modern and late modern *imaging technologies.* But they only produce an *image* and, going all the way back to Plato, I will argue they *do not embody. The Matrix* is a hi-tech cinematographic imaging process, bringing into play all sorts of new special effects, capturing our fantasy and attention. But the route to *The Matrix* reflects this much longer history of imaging. Slightly modify the lens opening to the *obscura,* add a shutter, insert photographic, light-sensitive film, miniaturize and you have a "Kodak." All this takes place from the mid-to-late 19th century. This late modern imaging, however, "images" something very different from more ancient imaging and can be described as the technological manipulation of time-experience. Again, a foreshortened history: Joseph Niepce (1826) managed to project images on light sensitive film, but with very long exposure limits, thus also limiting the choice of objects to only stand-still objects, for example architecture; Louis Daguerre (1839) perfects and begins to speed up exposure time, with portraits – requiring you to stay very still – becoming popular. Eduard Muybridge (1878) made the leap to milliseconds with multiple cameras and did thousands of motion studies of subjects like galloping horses with all four feet off the ground and naked men and women in motion, and in the process inventing time-imaging manipulation which began to make what was never before *perceivable* visible in images. A French photographer did the same to show how a cat, dropped upside down, righted itself before landing on the ground. And, then, finally there is motion picture photography, the "movies," with the Lumière brothers, from 1895.

For anyone born after the 1920's, when sound is added to film – all this imaging, from stills to time-lapse photography – allows those who experience this style of imaging perceptually to perceive it audio-visually.

This imaging has thus become part of the contemporary visual lifeworld. But, it is a visualization with a difference; it is not fully-embodied experience and it is what could be called a kind of *counterfactual visualization* – it is a display or "theatre." We do indeed see the isomorphic, photographic "realism" of Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs; we see earliest *cinéma vérité* shots of a train entering a station; we see the reversed motion shots of the cat jumping backward to its upside down position; and we see the time lapse photography of the sunflower following the sun through the day. Time stops, speeds up, reverses, slows down. Our whole bodies can see the visual spectacle, beyond ordinary vision, but our full embodiment does not participate. It remains constrained, despite desire, despite fantasy. No cat can reverse its jump; and were we to mimic the sunflower, standing in one place and keeping our face turned towards the sun motion, not only would this be difficult, but we would probably be so impatient as to give up the task. Or what about the astronomer who today can actually produce emission images of 13 billion old galaxies? Even in spite of the style of mathematical physics which sees no reason for non-reversible time, no one has ever imaged a 13 billion year-old *future* galaxy. Galaxy realism is always limited to its past emissions.

In technofantasies, constraints tend to disappear. Flying, in *The Matrix,* is not technology-assisted. Neo and Agent Smith, using the visual quotations from earlier Kung Fu movies, fly at each other. This tradition of non-assisted human flight may derive from the earlier fantasies associated with "Superman." Neo learns to speed up and slow down his motions such that he stops bullets which are imaged like the fast arrows of "Men in Tights," and there is even time reversal in the saving of Trinity. From our ordinary, now imaged world, this is visualized. But where are *we*? Like Plato's prisoners, or like Descartes' homunculus, we remain in our forward-oriented, relaxed bodily position, *inside the theatre*. This is not like a rock concert where we are getting into the music we embody, in an experience that is not reversible, but involves hypnotic whole-body motion, a bodily motion which moves with the music, by all actors in the same context. The rock star can be thrown out to land on the upturned hands of the audience; but in cinema, we do not jump up on stage to punch out Agent Smith. I am suggesting that there is a unique kind of embodiment which allows the visual fantasy enhancement of something like a *Matrix* technofantasy to be what it is.

Early imagers recognized this problem and tried to add more complete sensory experience. I have referred to IMAX with its 70mm projection and surround sound; other versions have added shaking seats and floors, or, as in airplane simulators, motions added to the cave-analogues. There was even

"smellovision." These are the technological trajectories aimed toward today's virtual and augmented realities. But are these in fact "better"? In early 2004, I played inside two "virtual reality caves" in Umea, Sweden. The immersion involved goggles, 3-d, and a hand-held pointer, my motions were monitored by ceiling sensors; the 3-d projections were co-ordinated with my bodily motion and I could choose where I would go, following a sort of video-game like context. Previous unreal or odd senses of bodily motion occurred again, but this time I decided to seek the program's constraints. I tried to penetrate the wall of the castle, but I could not; I tried to jump off the cliff and fly over the sea, but I could not; what I could do was limited to following the game plot. This experience was one in which my sense of embodiment produced a stronger contrast with the fantasy of the game than any cinema experience. To me, this was even more obvious than the chained restraint system of Plato's cave. *The Matrix*, of course, does better, probably in part because it is visualized rather than embodied. Neo learns to stretch the program with his time stops, reversals and speed ups, in addition to his Kung Fu movements; Agent Smith learns, like a virus or worm, to replicate himself and develop almost a personality of his own inside the program. Embodiment, I hold, contains the clues to recognizing constraints and thus the plays upon appearance/reality, whether in the cave, the camera, or the Matrix. In short, I remain a phenomenological skeptic with regard to this entire tradition of technofantasy and embodiment. I cannot imagine any of the variants of entering a theatre and yet not knowing one is entering a theatre, with its demand of a suspension of belief; only the oaf rushes onto the stage and beats up the villain who demands the rent from the hapless victim of a melodrama.

Is Moravec an oaf, then? And will he offer his mind for downloading into a computer program? It is at this point that I want to suggest, but only begin to suggest, a radically different interpretation of technologies as they relate to our lifeworld. Computer-enhanced, computer-processed, computer-tomographic processes are the latest versions of imaging technologies. They become more and more sophisticated, but remain short of experienced embodiment. From the rather limited "Agent Smiths" in the first *Matrix* film, with actors all made up to look like Smith, we move, by the third film, to the digitally imaged, "thousand" identical Smith replicants. Computer imaging, modeling, simulations, already began to take shape in the mid-20th century. Today, any version of whole-earth or environmental modeling, CT, computer-tomographic processes, *constructs images*. There are several important techniques involved, but one is especially relevant to Moravec's technofantasy: computers can convert digital codes into images and reverse the project. Not too many years ago, on my home computer I received an email attachment from my oldest son – I pulled it up and pressed "print."

Many pages later, my printer produced some 24 pages of code; no one could tell what it was supposed to "mean." So, I asked my wife, Linda, to look at it at school on her optics and, in one page, the result was a digital photo of my son, his wife, and our new grandson. This was code-to-image and back again. Space probes, modeling, medical imaging, all include this technology. It is analogous to early photography, then movies, stop-time, speed up time, reverse time – *in imaging. The Matrix* actually foregrounds this reversibility – the cascades of data displayed are the flip side of the Kung Fu flights. In short, once again, this imaging pattern has become part of our visual experience, within our lifeworld. It *seems* only a short jump to falling into our movies, our televisions, our imaging devices and thus supporting the Moravec fantasy. But is this really the case?

What if we give up our slippery slope, sliding into and out of technologies themselves and instead *embody ourselves through* our technologies? In his *Phenomenology of Perception,* Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes a blind man using a cane. He *experiences touch, feel, extension at the end of the cane.* His experience is directed through the cane and touches the sidewalk. This touch-at-a-distance has become well known to cognitive scientists and neurologists. The fact, for example, that through a prosthetic third arm Stelarc, the artist, is able to write, is noted by Andy Clark (2003). Clark notes that our "technologies become transparent" (I would prefer the term "quasi-transparent," since there remains an "echo" awareness of holding the cane in the background). But strictly speaking this has always been the case. It is just that our fantasies did not turn out at all the way we expected them to be. While no human-invented airplane ever came near the performance of a humming bird or even a beetle, much less a red-tailed hawk, the stunt bi-plane I once flew in as a passenger could fly straight up, flip over and dive and at speeds faster than any harrier. And, were I to be able to afford $30,000, I could myself fly an MIG-19 at supersonic speed, embodying the craft quasi-transparently as I make a banked turn – more complex than a cane, but embodied nevertheless. Yet, when I leave the plane on the runway, it remains, as it were, my past exo-skeleton in its parking spot. It even looks like, by placing an electrode saturated cap on my head, that I may be able to move a cursor at a distance by directing my own bodily electricity and experience a new style of embodiment through a technology.

So, let me conclude with something of a surprise: Moravec is looking in the wrong direction with his hoped for download of his mind into a computer. I, at least, have been going through this process for decades. Here I am, "in" my words, right "before" you; you can pick me up and read me anytime. The catch, of course, is not unlike the fulfillment of human flight, it will be disappointing because no matter how many times you come back to

this essay, it repeats itself. It will not pop up as a new and different article before you each time. This essay may change in meaning in very different ways but hardly so "in my daily embodiment where I am my body," and not in "real time" – where I escape the download, always exceeding it, getting out of the cave, turning around inside the camera, or walking outside the theatre. As Merleau-Ponty said, "there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (1962: xi). In short, we do not need technofantasy to be technologically embodied; we need, instead, to develop the skills and imaginations to be creative through our technologies. Neo needs to "unplug" not to rid himself of technologies, but to remove the illusion that he cannot tell when he is or is not entering a *theatre.*

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QUEERING *THE MATRIX*: HACKING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND SLASHING INTO THE FUTURE

AIMEE BAHNG

Abstract

This essay's initial line of inquiry examines how race and sexuality function in the *Matrix* trilogy. Though the films cultivate a pan-ethnic aesthetic, this attempt to signal a future in which humanity unifies across racial boundaries against a non-human threat ultimately reveals itself to be a superficial bronzing over of racial differences rather than an earnest consideration of race as a social construct. Despite the films' central dogma of questioning "what is real," the *Matrix* trilogy lapses into essentialist racial divisions of reproductive labor. This essay studies the racialization of sexuality in the three *Matrix* films and then goes on to present one arena in which these stereotypes are conscientiously, playfully, and provocatively broken. The latter half of this essay, then, shifts its focus away from the films themselves and looks, instead, toward the still related but less regulated space of *Matrix* fandom and the slash fiction that imagines a reorganization of race and sexuality in the *Matrix* world. So, rather than lingering too long on the failings of the *Matrix* trilogy to deliver a more innovative futurescape, the essay turns to the ways in which fans wrest control of the films from the filmmakers to make good on the potential they saw in the original *Matrix* premise. This move is made with the guidance of cultural theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Constance Penley, both of whom argue for the agency residing in the everyday pedestrian, the consumer, the viewer, and the fan.

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law… When one goes up there, one leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators… One's elevation transfigures one into a voyeur. It puts one at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed"

> into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. (Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City")

The final shot of the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* shows Neo (Keanu Reeves), emerging Superman-like from a telephone booth and leaping into the sky. His ascension above the city demonstrates his mastery over what he has come to realize is "the Matrix" – a simulated metropolis constructed to keep human minds docile while their bodies fuel a totalitarian machine state. Neo's newfound ability to fly provides viewers with the fantasy fiction of seeing the whole from above. He has surrendered his pedestrian navigation of cubicle mazes and crowded Chinatown street-markets to become what Michel de Certeau calls a "voyeur-god" (93). Neo's godlike outlook over the city registers a profound shift in the visual and ideological mechanics of the *Matrix* project. What does it mean that the hacker-pedestrian has transformed into this flying savior? The cyberpunk hero has never aspired to such *übermensch* grandeur. Neo's ascent to the skies is a sort of donning of the cape – an adaptation of smug super-heroism so unbecoming a cyberpunk hero. Once seated at his terminal, gazing at a screen, or jacked into and bound to a chair, Neo's vantage point of the world used to resemble that of the classic cinematic audience. The shift in perspective bespeaks a more fundamental, paradigmatic change within the project – a move to reclaim the creative space the first film opened to viewers, who had been instructed to question their passive relationship to the cinematic apparatus.

The fundamental mantra of *The Matrix* is to question "what is real." Audience members took these lessons to heart. Because viewers are sutured to Neo's awakening process in the first film, they are invested in the lessons he learns along the way: question reality, disillusion yourself of the simulacrum, and establish a sharp and persistent awareness of the system's constructed nature. In other words, the viewer is called upon to intervene in the viewing process and is invited to engage with "the film" in a more interactive way. The interface is much more akin to that between user and program than between viewer and visual event. The director, then, is not the director. The film is not a film. And the viewer is not a viewer. Perhaps we can think of the director as a software writer, the viewer as an active user, and the film as flexible code, manipulable and fluid rather than scripted and static. As the film becomes more intractable and more open to amendments and revisions, the big question remains whether or not the directors manage to let go of their stewardship of the project. Neo's ascent mimics the rise to power of the Wachowskis, two brothers whose fascination with the often anti-authoritarian genres of science fiction, Japanese animation, and kung fu films runs up against their delight in having a finger in every pot and in

keeping some element of control over as many aspects of production as possible. The tension between Neo as hacker and Neo as savior addresses on screen the paradox unleashed by the initial invitation for interactive viewing and the second-thought directorial cravings for more control.

This relationship shows up most tellingly in the DVD extras, where cast and crew not only expound on the virtuosic, detail-obsessed Wachowski brothers but also make much of the technological apparatus that made this visual event so remarkable. Such is the simultaneous celebration of a technology they purport to control minutely and the tacit acknowledgement of ways in which they do not have total control. John Gaeta, visual effects overlord of all three *Matrix* films, gloats over his mastery of new cinematic techno-powers, such as "bullet-time" special effects and digital "interpolation":

> [W]e can create new frames of moments in between…the captured frames to make moves longer, and/or stretch them out, or do time-compression effects… We're talking about cameras that are now broken from the subject matter, that are virtual… and it will be as revolutionary as when cameras came off sticks and went to a crane, when they came off cranes and went to steady cams. ("Taking the Red Pills," *The Matrix*, 1999).

Depicted as the real world superheroes of the *Matrix* films, Gaeta and his film crew orchestrate the sweeping, 360-degree panoptic shots that simultaneously erase the camera's presence and highlight the special effects at work. Even as Gaeta revels in the level of control he exerts over the product, he exposes the technological apparatus that makes such seamlessness possible. Scott Bukatman describes the "reflexive spectacularity of special effects" as a phenomenon particularly salient to science fiction films, which he calls "an exhibitionistic cinema" (1993: 13).[1] These contradictory impulses—to conceal and to exhibit, to close and to open, to master and to surrender—provide the occasion to articulate how the *Matrix* project attempts, but fails, to commandeer the reception and meaning of its films.

The filming of Gaeta's giddiness for a DVD special feature is part and parcel of the deeper commercial ambitions of managing an expansive field of viewer interaction and consumption of film-related products. Through aggressive marketing, merchandising, and licensing schemes, the *Matrix*

[1] Bukatman is actually quoting Tom Gunning's theorization of "an exhibitionistic cinema" (Gunning, 1990: 57).

presents itself as a whole universe of play, rather than "just a film."[2] The *Matrix* enterprise offers consumers interactive DVD extras, spin-off animations, comic books, video games, toys, screensavers, and even a collection of philosophical essays on the official Warner Brothers website. At whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com, several distinguished thinkers share their readings of the films' *Alice in Wonderland* allusions, Christian/Buddhist/ Gnostic references, and engagement with Baudrillard's simulacrum, Plato's cave, or Leibnitz's monadology. These new extensions of the *Matrix* diegesis invite the consumer to see "just how deep the rabbit hole goes:" however, this essay chooses to look beyond the commercial *Matrix* for sites of production that remain afloat in the more resolutely deregulated spaces of creative fan response. The latter portion of this paper takes a closer look at how *Matrix* fan fiction simultaneously adulates and disobeys the dominant, official interpretations of the *Matrix* universe.

First, though, I want to address where these opportunities for disagreement and intervention occur. Points of rupture and contradiction within the *Matrix* films yield these noncompliant narratives. My hope for this exchange is that I can first show some examples of when the trilogy ideologically comes into conflict with itself, and then move on to the ways some fans have seized upon these opportune moments to carry out the work of hacking that the *Matrix* project ostensibly champions initially. The stock, heterosexual resolutions and unimaginative formulations of race and gender that plague the *Matrix* films beg for the kind of rewriting of codes that the narrative's cyberpunk roots should promote. "Hacking" and "queering" are useful terms for thinking about the kinds of intervention this paper tries to make, but since I started with de Certeau, I might also call it a "pedestrian speech act" (1984: 97). What would it mean to re-map the *Matrix* films from the perspective of the pedestrian rather than the voyeur? How might an

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[2] The trilogy is staged as a postmodern epic. Cultural critic Melani McAlister, whose work I will return to later in this paper, writes that "'Epicness' situated filmmaking as a form of American power – and film-*going* as a practical and accessible participation in that knowledgeable relation" (2001: 60). Though McAlister addresses a post-WW2 moment in particular, her comments also seem salient to the post-capitalist era of globalization, in which the *Matrix* films take part. Warner Brothers made a concerted effort to create an immense spectacle out of the last Matrix film opening. A September 29, 2003 press release reads: "Warner Bros. Pictures and Village Roadshow Pictures to Make Cinema History with Global Unveiling of *The Matrix Revolutions* on November 5, Making the Film Available to Fans Around the World at the Same Moment in Time." Clocks were synchronized. Countdowns commenced. And the idea was that the whole world could form an imagined global community around this one film debut.

"ordinary practitioner…make use of the spaces that cannot be seen" (93)? What kind of speculative steps have already been taken to help queer the way one navigates the *Matrix*?

De Certeau begins his essay, "Walking in the City," from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Neo's transcendence above the Matrix schema perhaps represents an effort to recuperate those panoramic views of order, normalcy, and security for a bereaved, post-9/11 audience. Released in 1999, the first *Matrix* film felt more noir, more about renegade heroes than godlike saviors. By the 2003 release of the sequels, *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, the Wachowski brothers found themselves directing their content to a significantly different cultural climate. Contextualizing the *Matrix* "phenomenon" in this specific history might also help to explain the films' reversion to a trite, humanist message that faith and love will save the day. By the end of this essay, though, I would like to have demonstrated how Neo's hacker duties to intervene in the dissemination of such bad code might fall into the purview of another unlikely hero – the fan.

Sex/Race/Space

One of the difficulties of writing about the *Matrix* is the sharp disconnect between what the *Matrix* project purports to do and what it actually does. At first glance, the *Matrix* films seem to engage in the politics of liberal multiculturalism. A remarkably abundant number of non-white actors comprise the core cast (and crew) of the three *Matrix* films. This apparent embrace of ethnic diversity and multiracial hybridity, though, operates only at the level of aesthetics; it does not permeate the project's underlying ideologies whatsoever. The films cultivate a pan-ethnic aesthetic that pretends at a consolidated humanity but ultimately reveals itself to be a superficial bronzing over of racial differences. Despite promoting an attention to the constructedness of social realities, the films fail to consider the social construction of race. Even though the films meticulously disavow race as a contentious issue in this near-future world, race remains at the very center of its ideological structure.

Race delineates space in the *Matrix* films, and these spaces are markedly segregated according to stock stereotypes, which elide any serious engagement with reimagining racial formation in a post-apocalyptic world. While hemp-clad, black bodies predominantly inhabit Zion, bodies within the Matrix are almost always white and urban. Cast in the most visible rebel leadership roles are Laurence Fishburne, Jada Pinkett-Smith, and Cornel West, to name just a few of the more high-profile black actors fighting the

war against the machines. The machine leaders, on the other hand, are played by Hugo Weaving and a plethora of other white actors playing agents with names like Smith, Brown, Jones, Jackson, Johnson, and Thompson.

Meanwhile, South and East Asian bodies navigate the interstitial spaces of the Matrix, such as the sterilized hallways of *Reloaded* and the purgatorial subway station in *Revolutions*. Characters such as the Keymaker (Randall Duk Kim) and Seraph (Collin Chou) facilitate rapid passage between otherwise incongruent spaces of the Matrix, and they do so entirely to serve the purposes of others. The Keymaker carves shortcuts through the backstage hallways to guide Morpheus and Neo to the mainframe computer. Seraph's primary function is to protect "that which matters most:" the Oracle. At the beginning of *Revolutions*, the Oracle even transfers his service over to Trinity and Morpheus: "For years [Seraph] has protected me," she says. "I hope he can do the same for you." Seraph then turns to Trinity and Morpheus, bows slightly, and humbly says: "Please. Follow me," in a notably accented English. Seraph and the Keymaker, depicted as subservient and asexual, fulfill the Orientalist fantasy. Asians in the *Matrix* films seem caught in the liminal geographies between the black and white technological realms of Zion and the Matrix. For Asian American and queer theorist David Eng, this marginalization and accompanying "racial castration" might be rather predictable, considering the "historical legacy that has unrelentingly configured Asian Americans as exterior to or pathological to the US nation-state" (2001: 33). Both alien to and "key" citizens of the *Matrix* universe, Asians reside primarily in purgatory, facilitating the interchange between ruling and subordinate classes. One could consider them the indentured servants in a system whose needs require not only slave labor but also an entire force of service-sector workers.

In a subway station situated in limbo between the machine and human worlds, Neo encounters a South Asian family of computer programs, who are in the process of smuggling their daughter, Sati, into the Matrix where she will help the Oracle bake cookies and code-simulated sunrises when the need appears. In the form of this family, Neo comes face to face with the sign of techno-industrial labor, which takes place primarily "offshore".[3] These Asian

[3] Lisa Nakamura articulated this connection between the South Asian family and Donna Haraway's theorization of offshore labor in response to a question I raised at the end of the presentation she gave on race in the *Matrix* sequels at the "Powering Up / Powering Down" conference in San Diego, 2003. Haraway writes: "In my political myth, Sister Outsider is the offshore woman, whom US workers, female and feminized, are supposed to regard as the enemy preventing their solidarity, threatening their security… 'Women of colour' are the preferred labour force for the science-

bodies signify invisible, supplementary labor that threaten to get smuggled in from the margins at any moment. This assertion also relates extra-diegetically to the team of Asian men holding the very wires that permit Neo to leap and soar through the air during his fight scenes. The labor of these "wire-fu" masters must take place in the margins if the illusion of preternatural movement on-screen is to be sustained. If Asians populate the in-between spaces of the *Matrix* universe, the more polar topographies of the human city, Zion, and the machine-made Matrix construct serve to delineate the polarized US racial imagination of blacks and whites.

In stark contrast to the crisp, bleached lines of city life within the Matrix simulation, Zion's Real-World aesthetics engender earthy tones, natural fibers, and organic forms. Rendering the virtual world of the Matrix construct in cold, green shades and Zion in warmer, amber hues, the filmmakers map out color schemata to delineate the cinematic landscapes—an effect problematically augmented by the corresponding racialization of these spaces. Zion inaugurates the human war against the machines with an orgiastic rave comprised mostly of golden- and brown- toned bodies. The absence of whiteness in Zion becomes quite pronounced if you watch the opening skit of the 2003 MTV Movie Awards, which places hosts Justin Timberlake and Sean William Scott with pale-skinned, red-headed Andy Dick on the Zion temple floor, standing out like sore thumbs.[4] The fun in the skit lies in their visible interruption of the undulating tawny mass of lithe, Alvin Ailey-esque dancers. The rave sequence is riddled with extended, slow shots of barefoot stomping, mud between the toes, and anklets jingling to the beat of the drums. The close-ups of these unshodden feet gestures toward a certain primordial contact with the earth; whereas, shiny black shoes – whether belonging to Agent Smith or to Neo and Trinity in the famous lobby shootout scene – squeak the sounds of uncomfortable, synthetic materials within the Matrix. In Zion, one must remove one's shoes before entering the temple hall, but the machine world, which purports to be the epitome of civilization, does not deign to endorse such "primitive" practices.

I want to say that what I have been calling "the rave scene" is the perfect example of the ways in which this film simultaneously targets multiple audiences. What goes on in that temple-cave is, indeed, wildly fetishistic. For some, the playing of drums, the temple carved out of nature itself, and the slow-motion dreadlocks constitute a heavy allusion to Rastafari movements; this is not a rave, but a *binghi*, or a grounation ceremony.

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based industries, the real women for whom the world-wide sexual market, labour market, and politics of reproduction kaleidoscope into daily life" (1991: 174).

[4] This skit is actually included as an extra on *The Matrix Reloaded* DVD, which co-opts the spoof as part of its own, controlled package.

Morpheus' "I remember" speech intones Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" civil rights era sermon. For others, the space is reminiscent of a queer club scene. Whether one understands the cave to be an allusion to Plato's cave, a rave scene, a Rastafarian *binghi*, or a queer club, the cave ultimately is the place where all specific references are supplanted by subtle but important substitutions. This could be a queer club if the scene weren't insistently being interrupted by heterosex: Neo and Trinity's tryst spliced repeatedly into the aerial pans of the dance floor, the close-up of Link and Zee, and the carefully placed professional dancer teams who are all paired as straight partners (men lifting women). The scene might feel like a grounation ceremony but there is a marked absence of ganja in smoke-free Zion. And, though Morpheus "remember[s] one hundred years" of human enslavement to machines, he can only remember slavery in an ostensibly post-racial moment. The memory of the much longer historical African slave trade that fueled European colonial expansion gets displaced by this more general story of human oppression. Such historical amnesia serves the purpose of universalizing the slave experience and limiting racial discourse to a liberal multiculturalism championed by the films even down to the skin tones of Zion's temple-goers, who have been bronzed over in uniform sheen.

What's initially exciting about the *Matrix* premise is the idea that slave descendants will be the ones to lead the human revolution against the machines precisely because they have already survived a previous slave era. Such an acknowledgement and celebration of black history, combined with the number of black actors hired onto these films to play the narrative heroes, suggests a certain degree of racial consciousness on the part of the Wachowskis. To the Afrofuturist, this narrative even delivers a resistance movement led by a legendary hacker played by Laurence Fishburne, whose character, Morpheus, is technologically adept and harbors an affinity for disobeying hegemonic systems.

What undermines this encouraging set of parameters is the romanticization of an essential blackness that the films embrace at every level. Zion, though part of the late 21st century, preserves all the trappings of an Industrial Age metropolis. Made of "earth, steel, and stone," Zion comes complete with a boiler room sublevel. Because Zion necessarily runs on mechanization rather than automation, its citizens are mostly working-class or military-class laborers. In preparing for war, Zion volunteers even transport mechanical parts in wheelbarrows, quintessential symbols of agricultural labor. Finally, Zion remains, at its core, a pre-industrial cave – primitive and sacrosanct in the form of a temple. In contrast, the Matrix construct clearly engenders the Information Age, replete with ethereal energy core, endlessly white hallways, and hyper-sanitary, postmodern aesthetics.

This contrast throws into relief the films' underlying nostalgia for a pre-modern social system, which has historically relied on both slave labor and the family as the primary units of production.

The films' tropes of black authenticity are further entangled in a fiercely heteronormative idea of community that pivots on a reproductive imperative. Zion is the last human city; its survival depends on the perpetuation of the species, and the conflation of these procreative demands with the racialization of Zion cultivates intensely troubling assumptions about black sexuality. How, then, could Cornel West, an eminent scholar of African American studies, endorse such a film by acting in it as a Zion Council member? Consulting his chapter on black sexuality in *Race Matters* confirms that Professor West is, of course, sharply aware of the colonialist myth that represents black people as "closer to nature (removed from intelligence and control) and more prone to be guided by base pleasures and biological impulses" (1994: 126-7). A formidable amount of scholarship, which West has most likely read, documents the profound damage this myth has wreaked on black bodies in both colonial and postcolonial times.[5] What might have seduced my former professor was the films' positivist affirmation of the black family – a project West himself advocates perhaps too unproblematically.[6]

Though the *Matrix* films do portray "healthy" black family units, they concomitantly reinforce a false equation between blackness and heteronormativity. The films also present a fairly masculinist idealization of the family. When Neo inquires after the lack of sockets on Tank's body, the enthusiastic ship operator proudly declares: "Holes? No. Me and my brother Dozer, we're both 100% pure, old-fashioned, homegrown human, born free right here in the real world. A genuine child of Zion." Tank's statement not

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[5] Sander Gilman's essay "Black Bodies, White Bodies," along with other works addressing the iconicity of Sarah Bartmann, points up how Western scientific discourse hypersexualizes black bodies. See also bell hooks' chapter "Selling Hot Pussy" in *Black Looks* (1992). Whether in the service of imperialist desire or in an effort to justify slavery, this myth has played a key part in racial formation in both Europe and the United States, both "then" and "now". Freud also participated in the pathologizing of "primitive" sexual impulses and David Eng provides a very interesting critique of *Totem and Taboo* and "On Narcissism" in the introduction to his book, *Racial Castration* (2001: 6-13). Mary Ann Doane, through a close analysis of Frantz Fanon's work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, also attends to the question of why there is an "intense sexualization of racism in the colonialist and post-colonialist period" (1999: 454).

[6] See Iris Young's critique of West's romanticization of the family (Young, 2000). She argues that West romanticizes the family unit and remains nostalgic for a 1950s familial model whose division of labor benefits men primarily.

only renders Zion the ultimate seat of authenticity; it also identifies heteronormative reproduction as "pure" and "old-fashioned". By calling himself "homegrown," Tank also invokes an archaic agricultural metaphor for women's bodies as fertile fields, waiting to be plowed and fertilized. His boasting about his lack of holes, orifices, or points of penetration sustains a misogynist association of femininity and vulnerability, and masculinity and wholeness. In the wartime politics of reproduction, these families apparently bring forth only able-bodied male children, or in this case, "tanks" and "bulldozers". Declaring himself a "genuine child of Zion", Tank volunteers his services to a patriarchal system of compulsory heterosexual reproduction. Under the survivalist circumstances of this world, humans vest their hopes in the power of black reproductive labor. In the context of US racial formation, this amalgamation of blackness, primitiveness, and procreative labor becomes highly unsettling.

The conclusion of the *Matrix* trilogy solidifies this troubling link between blackness and heteronormativity. The end of the war between the humans and machines re-situates viewers in the Zion temple cave, where most members of the last human city have gathered to await annihilation. News of Zion's salvation travels via "The Kid," whose underage military heroics helped stave off an earlier machine attack wave. The Kid's triumphant expostulations trigger a chain reaction of snapshot heterosexual couplings that serve to link up salvation with the family. Link, the ship operator, embraces his loyal wife, Zee. Morpheus and Niobe, arguably the father and mother of the revolution, hold each other tenderly as they pay their respects to their savior, Neo. Here, at the end of the war, Niobe and Zee, two of the most capable, compelling, and spirited combat fighters in the films, are re-incorporated into the domestic family unit after having fulfilled their more active duties in the sphere of homeland defense. The two couples also share in their renewed devotion to their faith. Morpheus has apparently converted Niobe and, in doing so, has won her heart. Likewise, Zee has persuaded her husband to adopt her religious beliefs and the practices of prayer. The "revolution" promised at the end of this trilogy culminates, then, not in an overthrow of hierarchical power structures, but in these all-too-familiar, nation-consolidating affirmations of the church, the family and "freedom".

If, as Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner argue, an "understanding of the ideology of contemporary Hollywood film is…inseparable from the social history of the era," then these overtures to conservative politics must be read in the wartime context of George W. Bush's Presidential tenure (1988: 7). Overt heterosexual resolutions are certainly not uncommon to science fiction films, especially in apocalyptic narratives of the last ten years – recall *The Fifth Element*, *Armageddon*, *Independence Day*. "Imminent

threat" during the second Bush administration sets the conditions for a vicious return to family values, patriarchy, religious fervor, and jingoism that manifests itself in all sorts of violent discrimination. In the case of the *Matrix* trilogy, the imminent extinction of a free human race all but institutionalizes reproductive, heterosexual intercourse as the only acceptable sex to have at the end of the world. Upon their return to Zion, the *Nebuchadnezzar* crew's primary impulse is to unplug and screw – and sex in Zion may be pleasurable, but it is first and foremost dutiful. Link cannot wait to ravish his wife, Zee, though upon returning home, he must postpone sex until after he has hugged his children – reminders that the sexual urges he is feeling must yield productive results. Likewise, when Zion erupts into its orgiastic rave, it is because Morpheus has incited them to dance as a form of protest, as a "celebration of humanity," which is what the DVD names this scene.

Within both narratives – that of the film and that of the nation – communities of color are heavily called upon to put their lives on the line to protect the homeland. Potential critics of this social pattern are meant to divert their attentions to a romanticized picture of the family and the universal duty to protect that core by fighting for one's country. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that these images of idealized heterosexuality work to

> shore up core national culture and allay white fears of minoritization… National heterosexuality is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship. A familial model of society displaces the recognition of structural racism and other systemic inequalities. (1998: 1)

According to Judith Butler, "compulsory heterosexuality works in the service of maintaining hegemonic forms of racial purity" (1993: 18). For these scholars, discussions about racialized and sexualized subjects cannot help becoming part of the same conversation.

It is important to note that for Neo and Trinity, the sexual encounter always gets superceded by more pressing matters of public service or divine revelation. Their eager caresses in the elevator cannot lead to sex because Neo must get out and hear the pleas of the people who look to him as their savior. Even later, in Trinity's chambers, the couple is unable to consummate their love. For Neo, sex leads to prophecy, if not to progeny; he shudders with divine vision rather than orgasm. Their sexuality also differs from that of the rest of Zion in that it remains a private affair. In any case, Neo and Trinity remain exempt from the reproductive burden; they are perhaps too

saintly (and too white) to be asked to procreate.[7] The reproductive imperative remains the primary responsibility of people of color.

As much as the films attempt to naturalize a relationship between blackness and heterosexuality, they also relegate queerness to the white world. Landscapes of sexuality get mapped onto the already-racialized spaces of the films. In Zion, bodies are authentically human, predominantly of color, and fiercely heterosexual. Most flirtations with gay sex are restricted to virtual Matrix spaces, positing queerness as a sort of synthetic sexuality.[8] If the possibility of non-reproductive heterosexual desire pops up in the Real World, it is quickly disciplined. In *The Matrix*, the aptly-named "Switch" wears her hair short and her patience for Neo even shorter. Her first line in the film involves telling Neo to take his shirt off so as to get de-bugged. Neo misunderstands at first, and Switch grows immediately irritated with his misprision. The indignity she expresses when Neo thinks she is coming on to him makes reading her as a lesbian even easier. Her contributions to the film, though, consist only of getting annoyed by Neo's cluelessness and of dying prematurely. Premature death also descends on the *Revolutions* character, Charra, who sports another pixie haircut, rippling biceps, and a giant bazooka. Her guerrilla tactics and agile teamwork with Zee prove to be some of the most effective fighting in the final battle against the persistently-drilling Machines. Her labor, though, is rewarded with a graphically violent on-screen dismemberment of her body. For collaborating with Link's wife, Charra is sadistically penetrated by several machine tentacles before being ripped apart and publicly punished for the queer potential she embodied. Though acknowledgements of alternative sexualities do make their way into these *Matrix* films, the narrative is exceedingly adept at closing those possibilities down.

The most overtly queer scene in the trilogy takes place in the Merovingian's headquarters during *Revolutions*. Deviant sexuality becomes the defining marker of danger during this scene. Also known as "the Frenchman", the Merovingian presides over a sublevel Matrix domain, which doubles as an S/M fetish club. His wife's name, Persephone, suggests that

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[7] I realize that reading Neo as white is somewhat problematic, as Keanu Reeves is avowedly biracial. Reeves' actual racial affiliations (and much-speculated-on sexual orientation) nevertheless serve to set him apart from the rest of Zion.

[8] Such a proposition would not be so damning if it weren't for the accompanying flip side of the equation that allies heterosexuality with all that is authentic, real, human, and therefore somehow better. Cultural theorists such as Donna Haraway and Sandy Stone might have us consider sexuality to be "synthetic," but in a way that would also have us challenge the privileging of the authentic, the original, and the natural over the hybrid, the mutable, and the conscientiously-fashioned.

this is a sort of queer Hades in which Morpheus, Trinity, and Seraph must barter for Neo's soul, caught for the moment in between the machine and the human worlds. The three black-belt rebels must fight their way into the area by literally turning their logic upside-down in order to pass the guards who run up walls and across ceilings. Queer bodies of all kinds, such as these vampire and werewolf guards, populate the Frenchman's playground. As the three rebel leaders make their way past the guards, they enter the main dance floor and interrupt a sea of bondage-costumed bodies, undulating similarly to the Zion ravers, but cast in an entirely different light. Patent leather and metal spikes replace organic materials on this dance floor, which is populated by primarily same-sex couples forced to stop their fondling of each other when the trio walks by. The contrast between the pre-modern and postmodern aesthetics of the two club scenes becomes even more startling upon realizing that the contrast is also racialized. Almost everyone in the fetish club is white. Queers of color don't seem to have permeated the imaginary topographies here.

On the other hand, the whiteness that does get represented in the Merovingian's club is of a specific inheritance. The filmmakers have bathed the Merovingian's lair in neo-Gothic décor, thus resuscitating the anxieties of Gothic literature. The Frenchman and his wife – played by French-Irish actor Lambert Wilson and Italian superstar Monica Bellucci – embody the revival of a fallen and sick European aristocracy, lacking in sexual and moral discipline. In her study of *Ben Hur*, Melani McAlister finds a similar mark of European difference and reads it as a means of positing European imperialism in opposition to post-World War Two, US world power:

> [I]n almost all instances, the Hebrews/Christians are played by American actors, while the Romans/Egyptians are usually played by non-American, often British, actors. The differences in the accents and personal carriage of the actors are mobilized as signifiers of imperial versus democratic values, with the Romans/Egyptians standing in for the fading British Empire and the American actors playing the brave inhabitants of the new, decolonizing nations. (McAlister, 2001: 65)

Reading McAlister's analysis alongside the *Matrix* films helps explain the Europeanization of the machine world in the Merovingian's headquarters. The Merovingian's taste for wine, "wiping [his] ass with silk", and succulent martini olives renders him decadent and excessive in his desires, as does his penchant for cake and infidelity. Trinity, most of all, is impatient with his philandering. With a gun to his head, she truncates his apparently cumbersome name, and addresses him simply as "Merv." In this swift turnover of power and control in the scene, Trinity expresses the US' own

arrogant impatience with waiting for "Old Europe's" help.[9] France, at the time of *Revolutions*' release, was an unutterable name in the US. Among other European nations, France would not condone the US initiative to invade Iraq. A significant swell in anti-French sentiment – made ridiculously evident by the decision to change the name of French fries to "freedom fries" in the US House of Representatives cafeterias – swept the US in 2003. France was characterized as effeminate and weak in both popular culture and news media political cartoons. By rendering the Merovingian effeminate, extravagant, and unhelpful, the *Matrix* sequels invoke the xenophobic and homophobic sentiment imbued in the anti-French position of US nationalist discourse at the time. Trinity's intolerance and dismissal of the Frenchman serves to close down the queer possibilities that arise upon the very filming of a scene that puts queer bodies on display to begin with.[10]

McAlister's analysis suggests how it becomes possible that the *Matrix* films can at once illuminate the images of and suppress the ideological commitment to queerness, racial diversity, and gender egalitarianism. "When US nationalism succeeded," she writes, "it did so because racial diversity and gendered logics were incorporated into the stories told about the moral geographies that underlay US power" (2001: 273). Though McAlister refers specifically to the Gulf War of 1990-1991, her observations ring true of the politics of incorporation surrounding the Second Gulf War, or the 2003 invasion of Iraq, as well. McAlister tells the story of how war conditioned a need for assent and cooperation on the part of communities of women and people of color. Her statement explains the ambivalent moves the *Matrix* films make; it articulates how a film project can pursue aggressively multiracial casting and yet also maintain racially segregated spaces in the narrative, or how it can invite queer desire onto the scene only then to demonize it.

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[9] The Merovingians ruled the Frankish kingdom from approximately the 4th to the 8th century A.D. They sustained mythological status as being Jesus Christ's descendants. Donald Rumsfeld referred to France and Germany as "Old Europe" in response to their refusal to support the US invasion of Iraq ("Outrage," BBC News).

[10] This excruciating ambivalence on how to deal with queerness in the *Matrix* trilogy reminds me of what happens at the conclusion of *The Return of the King*, where director Peter Jackson stumbles through alternating heterosexual and homosexual resolutions in order to bring *The Lord of the Rings* epic to an end. Jackson breaks up the various moments of anxious homosocial bonding with intensely heteronormative rituals. Two weddings and the two childbirths attempt to reassure an audience uneasy with Sam and Frodo's potentially homoerotic relationship by interrupting the narrative with strained iterations of familial bliss.

The films' disavowal of non-normative sexuality is best exemplified through the narrative arc of Agent Smith's metamorphosis into a virus. Whereas he once likened human beings to a virus, Smith himself has turned into the apocalyptic sign of HIV/AIDS in the movie sequels.[11] The gesture that facilitates transmission of the Smith virus is decidedly phallic and penetrative in nature. (Smith's technique of alteration-by-penetration can also be read as vampiric, as he reconstitutes his victims' bodies from the inside out.) Nearly all of these on-screen penetrations occur between men. There are one-and-a-half exceptions to this trend. Smith also assimilates the Oracle in her kitchen while another Smith hovers menacingly over Sati, though the viewer never witnesses the actual penetration. In both cases, the "intimate contact" is interracial, and, in Sati's case, it is pederastic. Therefore, Smith's viral replication remains linked to non-normative intimacies. When the computer virus metaphor becomes embodied by a man whose singular compulsion is to penetrate and therefore infect other men's bodies, the overall message starts to revive the 1980s mythologization of AIDS as a "gay disease" that seeks out and punishes promiscuous sex (cf. Treichler, 1988). When the Smith virus begins to threaten both the machine and human worlds, its eradication becomes the precondition for peace between the warring factions. The narrative clearly marks Smith's appetite for viral replication as a queer form of reproduction. If the films suggest that the epitome of heteronormative reproduction is the black family, they also indicate that queer sexuality resides in the body of a white gay man. Black bodies in this film have heterosexual, reproductive, and "natural" sex in the Real World; while the predominantly white, queer bodies engage in what the film's logic suggests is a synthetic sexuality that only takes place within a simulated construct. The damaging outcome of these layered oppositions is that they misleadingly place blackness and queerness at odds with one another, totally denying the possible intersection between the two. (What place might a black lesbian take in the *Matrix*?) One significant by-product of this racialization and demonization of sexualities is that the sequels, in effect, queer Smith as a character and inadvertently open up his relationship with Neo to all sorts of queer re-readings.

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[11] In *The Matrix*, Smith tells Morpheus: "I'd like to share a revelation during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species. I realized that you're not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed. The only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague, and we are the cure."

Space-Walker/Fan-Writer

> SMITH. Afterward, I knew the rules. I understood what I was supposed to do, but I didn't. I couldn't. I was compelled to stay – compelled to disobey. And now here I stand because of you, Mr. Anderson. Because of you I am no longer an agent of this system. Because of you I've changed. I'm unplugged. I'm a new man, so to speak. Like you, apparently, I'm free. (*The Matrix Reloaded*)

At the conclusion of *The Matrix Revolutions*, as Neo and Smith's balletic air duel comes to an end, Smith stands triumphantly over Neo's depleted body. On the brink of finalizing his victory, though, Smith begins to unravel. Once so in control of himself – the perfect embodiment of 1950s rigid masculinity – Smith starts coming apart at the seams. His voice falters, changing noticeably from his affected monotone slur to an emotion-inflected set of flustered intonations:

> Wait… I've seen this. This is it! This is the end! Yes... You were lying right there, just like that. And I… I stand here. Right here. I'm supposed to say something. I say: "Whatever has a beginning has an end, Neo" … What?! What did I just say? No… No… This isn't right. This can't be right.

Smith's lines start to present themselves as if they and his entire part in the scene have been, perhaps, pre-scripted. The disintegration of Smith's program integrity calls into question his character's overall manufactured nature. Where are Smith's lines coming from? Who determines the script? This postmodern moment of disjuncture punctures the spectator's sense of comfortable filmic progression. Smith suddenly becomes aware of his own performance, the fourth wall drops wide open, and, for me, Smith reverts for an instant to being the actor, Hugo Weaving, whose filmography reveals a verifiable celluloid closet. Smith's body has already demonstrated an extraordinary flexibility (and an uncanny rubberized elasticity), so imagining Weaving's body morphing into his previous roles – Frank, the gay neighbor in *The Kiss*, or Jeremy, a gay estate agent in *Bedrooms and Hallways* – is not much of a challenge. Devoted Weaving fans should know him best for his role as Tick/Mitzi, a drag artiste, in the 1994 film, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Perhaps the easiest leap for any *Matrix* audience member to make, though, would be to Weaving's part in another epic trilogy as Lord Elrond, Master Elf of Rivendell in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*. Appearing on neighboring screens between 1999 and 2003, Weaving would have simultaneously embodied these two different characters who nevertheless

share in their nimble physiques and non-human identities. In the cinema's modern star system, theorized thoughtfully by film scholars such as Richard Dyer, Jackie Stacy, and Judith Mayne, the audience recognizes Agent Smith as a deep palimpsest of Weaving's past roles. "[T]he 'text' of an actor's image… full of discrepancies and incoherencies," writes Mayne, matters "much more than the narratives that unfold on screen" (1993: 128). In this one moment, spectators can respond to Weaving's character as agent, elf, and drag queen all at once. Taking the actor out of the moment, as a spectator might do with Weaving in this scene, is one way an avid fan might intervene in the main narrative thrust of a film. A more radical fan response might yank that character completely out of the film itself and paste him into an entirely rewritten scene.

"Slash fiction" is the product of fans taking pleasure in developing potentially queer moments such as the final showdown between Smith and Neo. As Constance Penley finds in her ethnographic work on Kirk/Spock (K/S) slash fiction, most slash authors seem to be heterosexual women who find in these homoerotic gay male pairings a way of "ensuring the democratic equality of the pair," "eliminat[ing] its racism by celebrating miscegenation," and "avoid[ing] the misogyny inherent in the mythos by respecting the women characters and never using them to further the male-male bond" (1997: 145). Though I later take issue with Penley's presentation of slash fiction as utopian, her core assertion that these fan revisions orchestrate serious, innovative, and exciting cultural interventions establishes the foundation for this section of my essay.

For Penley, "there is no better critic than a fan" (1997: 3). As a critical fan of science fiction films for most of my life, I have both latched onto the imaginative potential of the genre and stumbled over the repeated failure of sf filmmakers to take full advantage of that potential. This paper has already aired many grievances against the *Matrix* trilogy. The compulsory heterosexuality, the conservative return to the family, and the essentialist racial stereotypes that overrun the sequels severely undermine any initial inklings of rethinking gender and racial norms the Wachowskis might have had. Despite a certain penchant for androgynous costuming and queer stylizations, and despite the racially pluralist aesthetic (deployed by casting strategists, costume and set designers), gender, sexuality, and race remain strictly within normative boundaries. Some fabulist fan revisions, though, indicate an important re-theorization of the ways we view and continue to respond to films outside of the theater.

It is not merely coincidental that this final showdown between Smith and Neo constitutes the most popular *Matrix* scene for fans to queer. Rereading and rewriting the tension between rivals as the scintillating charge

between lovers, *Matrix* fans love to "slash" this scene. Smith's and Neo's bodies are already dripping wet from preposterously oversized raindrops, and they collide in the actual film version at least seven times, sending orgasmic bursts of water cascading from their clothing. Though these torrential rains are meant to signify an end to all things, this fan suggests another signification:

> WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN:
>
> Neo and Smith stare at each other from either end of a RAIN-DRENCHED STREET in the matrix. On either side, rows of Smith clones watch the pair with interest. THUNDER booms.
> SMITH You like what I've done with the place?
> NEO It ends tonight.
> SMITH I know it does. I've seen it. That's why the rest of me is just going to enjoy the show. Because we already know that I'm the one who beats you.
> NEO You're about to get downlo-
> SMITH (breaking into tears) I'm sorry. Damn it, I promised myself – That came out all wrong. That... that wasn't how I wanted to say that. I never know what to say when I'm around You, man. You're just... AGHGGH! I'm making a fool of myself here.
> Neo approaches Smith and TOUCHES his face, tracing raindrops across his CHEEK.
> NEO No. Go on. (He smiles.)
> NEO I think you're doing fine.
> SMITH You have a soft touch.
> NEO You don't know the half of it. (Pinkerton)

Rain, in this reinvention of the scene, sets the stage for Smith's tears, recasting the moment as sentimental rather than apocalyptic. In another fan revision, titled "His First and Only," author Zelgadis Greywood reconfigures the rain to set a sex scene rather than a fight sequence: "Neo met Smith in the alley. The rain fell by Smith's choice, but the springtime scent of it came from Neo." This spring rain, the product of Smith and Neo's cooperative code-writing, initiates the reinterpretation of this scene as the culmination of the pair's reciprocal love. As in the film version, Smith acknowledges "a connection" between himself and Neo, but Greywood modifies the nature of that connection: "…[T]here is a bond between us," Smith tells Neo. "Because your touch, your taste, even your smell intrigues me. I find you captivating…" Here, the bond between the two men is unmistakably a sensual attraction. Simply put, Smith just wants Neo to "fuck [him] up the ass…" In Greywood's revision, what binds Smith and Neo together is not

merely "the equation trying to balance itself out," as the Oracle suggests in *Reloaded*, but, more urgently, a bond of desire.

Though *Matrix* slash writers most often pair Smith with Neo, many of them exploit one scene in particular to get at a Smith/Morpheus pairing. In *The Matrix*, agents capture Morpheus and interrogate him for access codes to Zion's mainframe computer. Despite employing various torture techniques and injections of truth serum, the group interrogation proves ineffective:

Agent Smith:	Why isn't the serum working?
Agent Brown:	Perhaps we're asking the wrong questions.
Agent Smith:	Leave me with him. Now.

Dispatching his fellow goons, Agent Smith arranges a private tête-à-tête with Morpheus. Given the hesitation and awkward looks on the faces of the other agents, Smith's request to be left alone with his captive must be construed as rather odd. Agent Smith's unconventional behavior continues through the rest of the scene. He unplugs himself from the agent communications net by removing his earpiece, and he even doffs his impermeable sunglasses to say: "I'm going to be honest with you…" As he leans in ever closer to Morpheus' face, Smith lingers on every syllable of his next line: "I… … hate this place. This…zoo. This prison. This reality; whatever you want to call it. I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell… if there is such a thing… I feel…saturated by it. I can taste your stink. And every time I do I fear that I have somehow been infected by it. It's repulsive. Isn't it?" That a machine can smell is the impossibility that writers like Greywood find enticing. As he delivers these lines, Smith traces his finger across the beads of sweat on Morpheus' forehead. A slash author called "Dalet Slash" describes this motion as "the subtle mockery of a lover's caress," and that mockery turns genuine in Dalet Slash's story when Smith kisses Morpheus, taking pleasure in the intimate contact: "His skin was warm and dark against mine." This fan speculation blurs the line between what the film characterizes as Smith's disgust for all things human and what can so easily be purposively misconstrued as Smith's attempt to repress intense desire for Morpheus.

In the film version, we are not allowed to linger over this queer possibility for too long. The camera cuts away from this intimate exchange to one of the key action sequences in the film: the lobby shootout scene. When audience members finally regain access to the scene, our gaze is sutured to that of Agents Brown and Jones who interrupt a clearly private moment. Smith, caught with his earpiece hanging out of place, hastens to recover his composure:

Agent Jones:	What were you doing?
Agent Brown:	He doesn't know.
Agent Smith:	Know what?
Agent Jones:	I think they're trying to save him.
Agent Smith:	Find them and destroy them!

What were you doing? The hint of accusation in this one line launches a bevy of slash stories about this scene, pouncing on the possibility that something queer might have been afoot behind closed doors when the camera was not looking. Dalet Slash includes an almost identical conversation thread but shifts the point of view from the intruding agents to Smith's subjective frame:

> "You're shaken," Jones said flatly.
> "No."
> I turned and left, wondering if he knew. Wondering if he could smell it on me. Wondering if he could tell in the difference of the pacing of my steps.

Dalet Slash actively imagines what the camera left behind closed doors. The other agents still interrupt the scene, but Smith doesn't snap so immediately into the mode of "Find them and destroy them" compensation. Instead, we are left "wondering" – wondering with Smith whether the other agents noticed the change, but also wondering, in the way Teresa de Lauretis (1980) suggests, about the kiss itself. The moment lingers in the air – in the smell of intimate contact and in Smith's errant, "w[a/o]ndering" steps.

Not all slash fiction stays so close to the original working of the scenes. Fan authors also choose to invent totally new characters and introduce them into a *Matrix* framework so as to make use of the basic sf premise without inheriting the already studio-controlled, *Matrix*-owned characters. In "Transition," readers follow the story of Carl/a, whose experiences can best be characterized as transgendered. Though she inhabits a male body in the Real World, Carla projects a female "residual self-image" within the Matrix. When "freed", Carla awakens to quite a shock. "I was stuck in a 100% male body." The only embodied existence she had ever known was as a straight woman of color in the Matrix; Carl's attraction to men, on the other hand, renders him queer in Zion. Carl/a's unique schism in subjectivity becomes the pretext for her/his recruitment to spy on a homophobic organization called "the Brotherhood." Because Carl can infiltrate the Brotherhood in Zion and, as Carla, also gain access to its database at a convent within the Matrix, s/he becomes the ideal candidate for dismantling the gay-bashing organization. Earlier, while attending school, Carl's peers persecute his difference: "It was hell. Not only that I had to come to terms with this strange body, its unknown behavior and feel, but many

students ridiculed me for I seemed to move and behave wrongly" (3Jane). After trying to learn gender normativity by watching basketball games at school, Carl/a eventually turns to the medical world in order to "fix" the fact that he as a man desired other men. 3Jane writes this part of the story as an exposition of Carl/a's internalized self-loathing. The psychologist s/he goes to see tries to "open [Carl/a's] mind to the idea that love knew no gender." 3Jane offers an optimistic rewriting of the queer's unfortunately more typical interaction with the medico-scientific institution. Carl/a not only learns that being gay is okay, but s/he even ends up with a job working at the Zion Medical Division. The *Matrix* premise enables 3Jane to write against a biological determinism of sexuality; Carl/a's queer tale is one in which a transgendered character gets to play the hero.

"Transition" also offers up many other social critiques in the process of telling Carl/a's story. Because Carl/a suffers more in the Real World, s/he questions the discourse of liberation and the politics of freedom-fighting. 3Jane also calls into question Zion's hyper-militaristic system, which entices potential soldiers with educational benefits: "Since everything at Zion was centered around the war against the machines, those who were willing to fight would receive the best educations." The educational divide also marks a severe class division between "field born" and "free born" humans. The most remarkable part of 3Jane's contribution to the slash fiction world, though, is this imaginative appropriation of *Matrix* conventions to theorize embodied and projected gender identities, which do not always coincide as they do in the films.

Slash stories like "Transition" and "His First and Only" are fabulously rebellious and queer appropriations, but they do not always engage in radical revisions of race. Though one could, like Penley, read the often interracial pairings found in slash fiction as a celebration rather than a denunciation of miscegenation, I remain skeptical of how race functions in these fantasies. *Matrix* slash fiction tends to reproduce the films' fetishization of exotic (non-white) bodies, even as the stories explore exciting possibilities of gender and sexuality. In "Transition", 3Jane describes two men Carl watches as they play basketball:

> One was very tall and sinewy, very long shiny black hair that used to fly behind him when he ran… The other was shorter, 6' maybe, brown skin – a bit lighter than mine – and a good build… After a short discussion the Amerindian shrugged and the brown guy came to the fence. His body was shining with sweat, his top was soaked with it. His hands clung to the fence at a position above his head.

"The Amerindian" remains unnamed for the length of the narrative, though "the brown guy" eventually becomes Carl's love interest, Mike. Carl/a's desiring gaze regards these racialized bodies as exotic Others, even though Carl/a is also of color. Kobena Mercer's discussion of racial fetishism draws powerful connections between the images of black men in the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, news media, sports, and pornography. "Regardless of the sexual preferences of the spectator," Mercer argues, "the connotation is that the 'essence' of black male identity lies in the domain of sexuality… [T]he black man's flesh becomes burdened with the task of symbolizing the transgressive fantasies and desires of the white gay male subject" (1999: 436-437).

In ScrewtheDaisies' "Golden Code", it is Seraph who becomes the object of Neo's erotic fantasies. Here, Seraph's seduction of Neo takes the form of a striptease that reveals a "taut, golden stomach", "shimmering in the tea house's dim light." On the one hand, finding an example of an eroticized Asian man is fairly exciting, given the cultural history of rendering Asian men emasculated and asexual in US literature and film. On the other hand, the tea house, perhaps even more than Seraph himself, exposes an effort to infuse the erotic scene with orientalist overtones that fetishize ethnicity. Given slash fiction's affinity with pornography, race becomes embroiled with the very articulation of desire in complicated ways. But, unlike the very neatly compartmentalized depiction of race and sex in the *Matrix* films, the desires formulated in *Matrix* slash fiction tend to be both queer and interracial – a proclivity that does not automatically indicate a conscientiousness of racial formation. To write a purely celebratory narrative of slash fiction would overlook the troubling ways in which racial fetishism undergirds much of the genre's framing of queer desire.

By offering a close reading of these *Matrix* slash stories, I hope to show *just a few* of the specific interventions *Matrix* fans have crafted in response to the films. My intention is not to provide the kind of comprehensive, ethnographic study of fan communities that Constance Penley has already written. Rather, this analysis considers a body of work produced by an often-overlooked group of film critics. Teresa de Lauretis writes that one of the primary interventions to be made in film and its critical discourses is "to oppose the simply totalizing closure of final statements" (1984: 29). This statement makes writing a conclusion rather difficult, but it also suggests that the most maddening part of the *Matrix*'s governing mantra was its shift from "It's the question that drives us" (*The Matrix*) to "Everything that has a beginning has an end" (*The Matrix Revolutions*). In an effort to entice multiple audiences, the films project multiple ideological apparatuses. These several, contradictory messages permeate the films at

once but compete for dominance at the conclusion, when all but the safest, most mainstream readings get decisively shut down. If the system controls everything, though, where is the space for resistance? For de Lauretis, resistance depends on respondents "to open up critical spaces in the seamless narrative space constructed by dominant cinema *and* by dominant discourses" (1984: 29). The *Matrix* enterprise's forceful drive to end everything that has a beginning does not consider the perpetuation of consumer production that persists long after the films have left the theaters. These fan-written, speculative fictions are based on, but created away from, the commercial juggernaut of the *Matrix* project. As such, they articulate what cross-dressing writer-director, Larry Wachowski, might consider the ghost in the shell of the *Matrix* media machine (Chung). Though "critics" and "fans" are often constructed as opposites, these fan critiques offer perhaps the most innovative re-theorizations of cinematic reception.

"Spectatorship occurs at precisely those spaces where 'subjects' and 'viewers' rub against each other," writes Judith Mayne (1993: 37). Mayne identifies a distinction between the hypothetical "subject" whom the film theoretically addresses and the actual "viewer" who sits in the audience watching the film. Mayne attends to this distinction, though, to disrupt the surety of its opposition. It is this seeming opposition – between the subject successfully interpellated by a film and the more resistant viewer who reads against the grain – that Mayne wants to complicate further. By proposing the notion of "the spectator," whom she situates somewhere between the viewer and the subject, Mayne also locates her own work somewhere between two approaches to film studies (one which she aligns with Althusser and the other she associates with Barthes). Her motivation to recuperate some agency for the "subject" and her desire to bring the "viewer" out of an overly passive position is similar to de Certeau's theorization of consumer-producers, or "users" who transform ordinary commodities into more subversive wares. Both Mayne and de Certeau consider spectatorship an active process of negotiation, not of viewing as thoughtless consumption. De Certeau's pedestrian spectator walks "where 'subjects' and 'viewers' rub against each other – the space of Mayne's "spectator." I propose that de Certeau's pedestrian and Mayne's spectator take material shape in the form of the fan. Fans, as both viewers and subjects, go to the movies to watch films; they comprise what a marketing director might call a target audience; and, they treat "reading [or viewing] as poaching" (de Certeau, 1984: 165-77). Fans may allow themselves to be taken in by a film but can also become its fiercest critics and its most passionate rewriters.

Science fiction fans, in particular, are busy at work taking control out of the hands of film writers, directors, and producers. Constance Penley

argues that "the slash premise…seems to work exceptionally well with science fiction couples because of all the possibilities opened up by locating the two men in a futuristic universe full of scientific and technological wizardry" (1997: 102). The *Matrix* premise – that the world is actually a codified construct of complex yet pliable rules – presents particularly rich opportunities for a slash author. Morpheus' question: "What is Real?" catalyzes other inquiries such as "What is Natural?" or "What is Normal?" – questions central to a queer theorization of sexuality. My earlier discussion of how these questions ultimately suffer terribly banal, conservative, heterosexist, and racialist resolutions within the *Matrix* films; however, *Matrix* slash fiction writers have offered several resounding, creative responses to these same lines of inquiry. These fan projects signal a certain investment in the projects of bending gender and denaturalizing the body. My most earnest hope, though, is that sf fan fiction writers might also commit to the equally urgent project of queering the color line.

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SEXING *THE MATRIX*: GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN/AS CYBERFICTION

RAINER EMIG

Abstract

While *The Matrix* (at least in its first cinematic instalment) proved one of the success stories of Hollywood cinema of the late 1990s, another matrix enjoyed a similar career in critical and cultural theory: Judith Butler's "heterosexual matrix" as the concept of an almost universal hegemonic ordering mechanism of Western culture. The parallelism is striking: both matrices rest on simulation, yet acquire totalitarian power and significance. This makes it all the more interesting that in the *Matrix* films, it seems, neither gender nor sexuality play any overt role. This raises the question, if one of the prominent uses of the so-called cyber-reality already available to us in the shape of the Internet is sexuality (and the number of porn sites by far exceeds that of all others), why does sexuality feature so little in a film which problematises virtual reality so drastically? Why does the film at the same time declare bodies a simulation and insist on their fetishistic adornment, training and transformation into androgynous fighting machines, but also penetration, mutilation, and random multiplication?

This essay provides a double critical reading: it reads the *Matrix* films through Butler's and other theories of gender and sexuality to determine to what extent they uncritically follow or, on the contrary, subvert the "heterosexual matrix." On the other hand, the essay also uses the films as a critical angle on theories such as Butler's to explore the question concerning the extent to which a commodified Hollywood product might be able to illustrate and perhaps even "criticise the critic(s)."

Introduction: Set-Up

Can one have sex without a body? Can one have a sex, can one have a gender, without body? The question appears trivial, but in fact it is rather tricky. When Jean-François Lyotard (1991) asked, "Can Thought Go On

Without a Body" in 1987, his answer was "no." When Véronique Zanetti (1988) posed the same question in the context of Kant's idealist aesthetics and Luhmann's systems theory, she ultimately sided with Kant's self-perceiving subject. And when, in the discipline of aesthetic theory, Hartmut Böhme (1997) asked whether one can think without a body, ten years after Lyotard, he left his answer strategically open.

The impulse to investigate the interrelation of bodies, their images, and concepts of gender and sexuality with regard to the three *Matrix* films arose from two observations, both of them superficial, at least at first glance, and related to two supposedly different spheres:

Observation 1: Sex (as sexual activity and its display) is the most important feature in contemporary virtual reality applications. The number of pornographic sites on the internet is likely to exceed all of its other uses.[1] Indeed, the fantastic economy of the libido seems to find its ideal counterpart in virtual reality scenarios. Yet the film trilogy that strove to take virtual reality to its critical climax, *The Matrix*, *Matrix Reloaded*, and *Matrix Revolutions*, largely does without overt displays of sexuality (the seeming exception in *Matrix Reloaded* will be discussed below). This is all the more surprising since its plot hinges on the production and reproduction of bodies – real bodies as sources of machine energy as well as idealised virtual ones – as much as on the supposed satisfaction of the needs of individuals, which keeps them in their slave-like dependency. The question thus arises why the opium of the masses in the *Matrix* films is boring everydayness – and not orgies?

Observation 2: In her seminal works *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler not only employs a constructivist model of explanation for sex and gender that contains many of the features that the *Matrix* films take up in fictional and cinematic shape. She writes, for instance, "of 'sex' no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies" (Butler, 1993: 3). Even her terminology highlights the importance of a "matrix," that of the so-called "heterosexual matrix" of normality, which, according to Butler, sexes and genders individuals. It functions by producing

[1] Exact figures, however, are contested. The "Cybersex" cover story of *Time Magazine* (3 July 1995) included an incorrect figure (83.5% percent of all images on Usenet are pornographic). This was rectified in a follow-up article three weeks later, but the figure of 80 % has kept haunting discussions of sex on the Internet. Alternative figures, such as *USA Today*'s claim of 3 September 1997 that of the then 200,000 commercial websites on the net only two to three per cent are sex-related, seem, however, equally unconvincing (cf. http://www.monroe.lib.in.us/~lchampel/netadv1.html).

– together with its "positive" realm – a zone of abjection, which is uncannily similar to the *Matrix* films' zone of dissidence:

> This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (Butler, 1993: 3)

Is this merely a coincidence? Or does it hint at a simultaneity of discourses, an intertextuality or rather interdiscursivity that pinpoints the status of bodies in contemporary culture and theory as precarious? Can one have a discourse of gender and sexuality without bodies? This would be the naïve question. The more subtle one, which already takes into consideration the implication of Butler's title and argument, would be: can one only have discourses of gender and sexuality with reference to "bodies that matter," i.e. bodies made meaningful? The way in which these bodies are made meaningful, and their implications for a discussion of gender and sexuality, will be in the focus of the present essay.

Even the fact that the *Matrix* films contain bodies at all derives from two forms of fascination that bodies exert on human beings: the specular fascination, i.e. voyeurism, and the intellectual fascination with categorising that which seemingly precedes, yet also exceeds conceptual thinking. In terms of the films' logic, machines in control of the world could not do much worse than pick humans as their source of energy.[2] Instead of unstable and unpredictable organic energy sources, any form of solar, geothermic, or tidal energy would be preferable. But even if organic input were the energy of choice, bacteria, algae and the like have a much better use of energy. Among the vertebrates fish would be the preferable "battery." However, how many viewers could a film on the struggle of soft- and hardware with algae or fish farms expect? The cinema viewer is a voyeur in search of human bodies. In that he or she simply highlights a constant in human behaviour. We watch bodies for erotic reasons, yet not exclusively so. We also watch them to make sense of the world, of ourselves in relation to others and objects. Sex and gender are the primary identifications that occur when spotting human beings.

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[2] This inconsistency is noticed by Slavoj Žižek, though he wrongly calls it "meaningless" (Žižek, in Irwin, 2002: 264).

How bodies become bodies that matter is therefore the initial question. As such it is still in line with the starting points of Butler's inquiry in *Bodies that Matter*. There, she writes:

> But if the descriptions of the body take place in and through an imaginary schema, that is, if these descriptions are psychically and phantasmatically invested, is there still something we might call the body itself which escapes this schematization? (1993: 66)

Butler's question can easily be applied to the most puzzling aspects of the *Matrix* films, such as "Which of its portrayed bodies are real?" or "Is only the world as perceived by the individuals in the Matrix virtual – or is their mode of perception also structured by the grid that is the Matrix?" It will emerge below, however, that approaching the question of the virtuality or ontology of the body – and the related questions of sexing and gendering it – via the *Matrix* films will also help to understand why the answers that Butler's inquiry produces appear to be so circular and therefore unsatisfactory – at least at first glance.

Level 1: Looking Around the Matrix

Considering Keanu Reeves' immaculate appearance throughout even the most gruesome scenes of physical violence in all three *Matrix* films and his smooth and almost undefined features even when he still represents "Thomas Anderson," the post-modern Everyman (with only a bit of ruffled hair for the sake of realism), it comes as a shock to witness the scar across his abdomen during the crucial scene of extracting the worm-like tracker device of the agents of the Matrix from his body. This shock is repeated when, before being "disconnected" from the Matrix, Neo is granted a vision of his and a multitude of other human bodies penetrated by the tubes through which the Matrix feeds – them and itself.[3] No matter how frequently and drastically bodies are disfigured and destroyed in the three films in endless scenarios of combat, these are the really obscene moments in every sense of the term: they bare the secret of an otherwise standardised ideal body to the unprepared eye of the viewer. They are also the only scenes that really turn a body into a

[3] Cynthia Freeland rightly points out that this is merely one of several scenarios of penetration in the film, yet her traditional feminist reading of this penetration falls into the trap of binaries of masculine and feminine again (Freeland, in Irwin, 2002: 207-208).

display – *ob scene* – without instantly framing it in technological ornament or intertextual reference.

Yet it would mean falling into the conceptual trap that the *Matrix* films consistently prepare for their viewers and critics to accept this moment as that of an "authentic" body, to be seen in contrast to all the idealised bodies produced by interfacing human selves with standardised software as part of the resistance against the Matrix. Reeves' scarred body, when it represents Thomas Anderson prior to assuming the role of rebel and saviour together with his new name "Neo," is merely one of the many simulations that the Matrix produces to maintain its hold on the humans it controls. The seemingly raw and authentic is a simulation; its supposed rupture of our expectations forms part of a pattern of symbolisation in which it represents "a real body."

Yet how do the bodies in the *Matrix* films procreate? As part of the computer-generated reality within the Matrix, of course, they are multiplied as copies or generated out of existing programme codes. Yet what happens to the embryonic bodies supposedly trapped inside the tanks controlled by the machines? Clearly they are not expected to meet and mate. Indeed the denial of freedom of movement and of exchange with others is probably the most horrific aspect of their enslavement. One can only assume that new body-batteries are generated by genetic manipulation or artificial insemination. Sexual activity is excluded in this scenario. And so is gender to some degree, for although the bodies in the tanks are male or female, in common with the established perception of foetuses they are only ascribed a sex once they are born. This is also evident in the scene of Neo's "birth" into the sombre reality of resistance during his "rescue" from the tanks, when he emerges like every human baby – covered in organic slime, an unsexed prototype to be granted an identity (and sex) only later.[4] Simone de Beauvoir's famous dictum "One

[4] Jean-Pierre Zarader writes:

> The sequence which shows Neo's deconnexion or (re)naissance is in this respect almost too explicit : the deconnexion from the tubes refers to the cutting of the umbilical cord and the aqueous environment which dominates the whole scene evokes at once amniotic fluid and baptism. It is thus clearly the birth or rebirth of new man. This is by the way what his name signifies : Neo, new. However, if the scene seems obvious, its meaning is much less so, even though the general interpretation of the film depends on it. The entire problem, which might well be unsolvable and is thus wrongly conceived, is to know what the Matrix is. What the film demonstrates, in fact, is that the Matrix is at once experienced as feeding mother (even though in reality it may instead be feeding on the individuals whom it consumes to ensure its own survival) and as information system. (In Badiou et al., 2003 : 43-44)

is not born, but rather becomes..." (1974: 301) here, for once, and quite rightly, also applies to a male.

Yet even after Neo's birth into masculinity[5] and his emergence into a scenario of individuals supposedly outside the control of the unsexing Matrix, there is gender-specific behaviour, but remarkably little eroticism and sexuality. Clothes, accessories, but also weapons are the dominant protagonists of the *Matrix* films, and one could argue that they play a much larger part than the restricted acting of the cast. What is evident is the fetishistic nature of much of the props that are so central in the films. We get black leather, one of the most traditional of fetishes, but also fetishistically uniform and sexless bodies (with the same dark, slicked-back hair for the two main protagonists Neo and Trinity, who are made even more identical and less individual by their identical sun-glasses). Phallic weapons and the libidinous ejaculation of endless streams of ammunition are further fetishistic features.

Yet, contrary to what Cynthia Freeland claims, leather and latex do not merely and simply cover up "the reality of their human flesh" (in Irwin, 2002: 206). Freud ascribed to the fetish the role of an imaginary healer of castration, a projection of castration anxiety on a supposedly "whole" object – which nonetheless continues to embody the lurking threat of castration in a painfully enjoyable tension. The tension is produced by the fact that the fetish permits the acknowledgement of that which is normally suppressed, yet only in the form of a negation. In Freud, this suppressed knowledge is that of women's lack of a penis. In the *Matrix* films it might easily be the awareness that all of its bodies are equally unreal, or that they are all equally reduced to organic batteries – and, as a consequence of either option, unsexed. The consequences that Freud outlines are again strikingly similar to those that the *Matrix* films envisage for their characters and their audience: the clinging to an idea of "real" and even "ideal" bodies despite the insight into their virtual status:

> It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained

[5] Freeland seems to have some initial doubts concerning the gendering of Neo's "born-again" body when she describes this scene as "a kinder, gentler scene of penetration. Again we see Keanu's nearly naked body displayed as he lies on a table. He is thoroughly penetrated now by gently waving acupuncture-style needles" (Freeland, in Irwin, 2002: 208). Yet this does not prevent her from asserting that, eventually, as the new-born Neo, Keanu Reeves' symbolic character overcomes the threats of such penetrations and represents a reassertion of traditional phallocentric masculinity.

> that belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached, as it is only possible under the dominance of the unconscious laws of thought – the primary processes. Yes, in his mind, the woman *has* got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute. Furthermore, an aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals remains a *stigmata indelebile* of the repression that has taken place. We can now see what the fetish achieves and what it is that maintains it. It remains as a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. It also saves the fetishist from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects. (Freud, 2001: 153-154)

Castration and/or the anxiety it produces is therefore also the way in which Freudian psychoanalysis sees the human being enter the dichotomy of the sexes by making men the possessors of the phallus (a symbolic exaggeration of the physical penis into an emblem of power) and women those who are deprived of it. It is important for the present analysis of both the *Matrix* trilogy and the critical theory that engages with identity and gender, however, to realise that what is shattered in Freudian thinking is by no means an awareness of reality or an imaginary unity. What the child suffering from castration anxiety loses is a first symbolic certainty, a first symbolic construction of a gendered, though still bisexual or hermaphroditic reality. The symbolic scenario of castration and fetishism is the successor not of an authentic state, not even of an imaginary state, but of yet another symbolic matrix.

The *Matrix* films follow this Freudian pattern remarkably closely. They do not show genitals, of course. This would contradict the policy of U.S.-films and make their distribution difficult, which would in turn reduce revenue. It would moreover contradict the Freudian pattern of displacement and suppression. But they also refrain from clearly indicating the possession of the phallus symbolically. Or rather, they distribute the phallus in unconventional ways. The symbolic penetration of Keanu Reeves' body when "becoming" Neo has already been mentioned. On the other side of the uncommon equation is the supposedly female figure of Trinity, who is as muscular, as leather-clad and coiffed as her male counterpart, and – perhaps most importantly – in equal possession and command of the many exaggeratedly phallic weapons, such as automatic guns, on which the action scenes of the films depend. Her eventual integration into established gender

plots, by penetrating her body and killing off her character in an act of self-sacrifice for the "saviour" Neo, is therefore as disappointing as it is necessary for the re-establishment of gendered "order." Gender afterwards becomes less troublesome.

Nonetheless, even the name "Trinity" contains this haunting multiplicity in terms of gender. If "Neo" is the Christ-like saviour-figure, the literally newest addition to the plot of universal salvation and the anagrammatical "One," how then can Trinity embody the entire arrangement of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost? Feminist theology has long pointed out the feminine character of the Hebrew "ruach" for Holy Spirit (and Trinity's miraculous resurrection of the dead Neo at the end of *The Matrix* through a kiss; her breath thus might very well play with this). But is she not also Neo (in terms of looks and acts)? Is she not also that which brings him into being – in terms of providing the motivation for his fight – and thus the "father" of his mission? It is certainly too simple to reduce the character of Trinity to "a typical subservient little girl" or even a "babe" (cf. Freeland, in Irwin, 2002: 209-210). Or is perhaps the "paternal" force behind Neo and Trinity the "maternal" matrix itself, if one applies Foucault's model of power as generated from resistance and Butler's rewriting of the same as the heterosexual matrix and its necessary realm of abjection?

The union of two idealised symbolic bodies fits this pattern. In the second *Matrix* film, *Matrix Reloaded*, we rather unexpectedly find an extended, though not very explicit sex scene between Neo and Trinity. Almost as if they were presented to us on an altar, they engage in carefully choreographed caresses. Their immaculate nude bodies, their faces, and their hair are almost identical during this scene, which therefore exerts more of an aesthetic than an erotic effect. But perhaps it is not titillation that is its primary aim. What might be at stake in it would be, according to both Freud and Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix, reassurance, not only along the lines that it would be unrealistic for two modern-day characters to suppress their mutual sexual attraction for such a long time. The reassurance rests in the fact that the scene simultaneously permits the characters to occupy their traditional gender roles – and transcend them. For what happens is close to a visualisation of a restoration of the state before the mythical Platonic split of humans into two sexes. The only explicit sex scene in the *Matrix* films thus gets it right and makes it right again. Yet it does so on the plane that has, from the start, been identified as that of the negotiation of sex, gender, and sexuality in the *Matrix* films: the plane of the symbolic.

Following this very logic, all the bodies that the Matrix chooses as symbolic challengers to those resisting its rule are male. This is, on the one hand, far from surprising, since men are traditionally the carriers of power

inside patriarchal systems. They are also stereotypically associated with the extremist rationalism that appears to hide behind the universalist aspirations of the Matrix as the one and only "global player" in the realm of software. Even today, women make up a smaller percentage of users of IT equipment and the internet, and female software engineers, though on the increase, are still a rarity.

Yet, on the other hand, this symbolic adherence to clichés brings with it its own irony. "Matrix," as Judith Butler points out with passing reference to Luce Irigaray, derives from the Greek word for womb.[6] It is thus a generative principle deeply immersed in notions of organicity and femininity – both of which the Matrix in the Wachowski films suppresses, even as part of its plot, even and exactly when this plot hinges on it.

The idealised virtual bodies of all three *Matrix* films are therefore proof of as well as an attempt to deny this paradox in a very Freudian way. The inevitable and continually necessary attempt of the symbolic to represent itself produces fantasies of the symbolic – which only posture as reminders of something more authentic: the imaginary, the physical, passion, lust, real bodies.

Even the machine-world of the Matrix apparently needs its fetishes to stem its anxieties. This becomes tragically and somewhat comically evident when in the last of the three films, *Matrix Revolutions*, Neo eventually manages to break out of his world of resistance and into the Matrix's realm of machines, Machine City. What cute, lovely, and impotent little critters the machines there turn out to be – a far cry from the battle-hardware that unsuccessfully attempts the destruction of Zion. Even machines, it seems, have their own phallic phantasm of power – which strives towards the total annihilation of a resistance without which it would not be. Gender and sexuality are crucial areas in this contest, in that they represent something that machines and software do not possess, but humans also only have as symbolic ascriptions. Simulation fights simulation, or virtuality celibacy.

Here it becomes important to remember once again that the healing or stemming of the threat of castration that Freud identifies as the origin of fetishism is not really concerned with a fear concerning the actual male body (even there, the anxiety is usually displaced from the testicles to the penis). The threat of castration concerns the stability of symbolic certainties, more specifically the symbolic identity of the self in relation to the initial poles of

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[6] "Irigaray makes a similar argument about the *cave* as inscriptional space in *Speculum*. She writes: 'The cave is the representation of something always already there, of the original matrix/womb which these men cannot represent...'" (Butler, 1993: 256, n. 34). The quotation within the quotation derives from Irigaray (1985: 244).

its identification. These are mother and father, again not as real bodily entities, but as at first vaguely defined symbolic binaries, who only later come to symbolise feminine and masculine. When the emerging human subject realises that its primary poles of orientation are both different and hierarchical, a traumatic dislocation of certainties and trust results. It is "healed" by symbolic identifications – with the father as the possessor of the phallus, with the mother as the target of libidinal energies, but sometimes in a conjuncture of both: the phallic mother.

The phantasm of the phallic mother supposedly denies the traumatic split of the parents into castrated mother and phallic father, while it simultaneously continues to assert and remind us of it. Much fetishism along the lines of domination fantasies (frequently involving leather-clad humans, often women, wielding a power that they are not ordinarily granted in society) results from this projection. Perhaps it is a fantasy that has also influenced theory to a greater extent than it is usually aware? For what is the concept of the heterosexual matrix other than a gigantic fantasy of a force for the ascription of basic cultural value, that of sex and gender?

Level 2: Taking the Theory Pill

According to Judith Butler, gender is the product of constantly repeated cultural performances, and heterosexuality is the matrix that generates the rules for these performances as well as establishing itself out of the perpetual reiterations of these rules:

> Thus, the repressive law effectively produces heterosexuality, and acts not merely as a negative or exclusionary code, but as a sanction and, most pertinently, as a law of discourse, distinguishing the speakable from the unspeakable (delimiting and constructing the domain of the speakable), the legitimate from the illegitimate. (Butler, 1990: 65)

So far, so Matrix. The "simulated" world of the Matrix indeed follows the rules of Butler's so-called "heterosexual matrix." But what is interesting is that all its dissident worlds do the same: on board the Nebuchadnezzar heterosexual tensions reign supreme; Zion even boasts the most traditional scenario of men going to war and women staying at home looking after the children. Even in the rogue programme universe of *Matrix Reloaded*, there is a heterosexual couple anxious to protect its digital offspring. And even in the ostensibly decadent world of the Merovingian with its soft-core hints at S&M and fetishism, it is men who exploit women – all the way up to the most

powerful woman, Persephone. Once again, virtual reality has no alternative to offer to the ideological realities of the late twentieth century that spawned the *Matrix* trilogy.

That there is no trace of resistance as far as one of the most hegemonic features of ideology is concerned is interesting, since much of the rhetoric of all three *Matrix* films (and consequently many pages of academic criticism of the same) are spent on debating the idea of freedom of the individual versus invisible, yet dominant (i.e. hegemonic) power structures. All the resistance there is follows the same liberal Western pattern that one is tempted to associate particularly with contemporary U.S. politics. It strives to secure its idea of the freedom of the individual by violently destroying the structures that appear to stand in its way. Yet it carefully refrains from asking what this idea of freedom actually entails. In this, and this is the important connection between Freudian thinking and ideological critique, it resembles the structures of the fetish. It deflects and projects, denies and accepts by denying – all in the service of rescuing some form of symbolic certainty on the crumbling foundations of an already shattered certainty.

As Michel Foucault reminds us, "there are no relations of power without resistance" (1980: 142). Thus the struggle of Zion and its emissaries against the seemingly overwhelming force of the Matrix might actually contribute to the Matrix's power – rather than threatening it. In the films' most radical gestures, they even signal that Zion's resistance might as much be an integral part of the Matrix's programmes as its toleration of "rogue" programmes such as the world of the Merovingian. Why must we therefore believe in resistance at all? Perhaps for the same reason that Neo and his more or less faithful collaborators decide to believe in it: to give themselves the impression that they exist – as fully fledged individuals with an all-inclusive package of free will, love, and destiny. But also as ontologically grounded individuals with symbolic identities – including those of gender and sexuality.

Once again, the heterosexual matrix (combined with heavy hints towards a Messianic form of religiosity) helps to maintain this belief. A crucial moment is the Oracle's reassuring advice to an increasingly desperate Neo who doubts himself and the meaning of any mission he might have: "Being the one is just like being in love. No one can tell you you're in love, you just know it." The analogies to any hegemonic form of truth – particularly the heterosexual matrix of integrated normative sexuality as the safeguard of an adapted existence, but also the liberal Western ideological

matrix of believing in a self-determined individual seemingly outside the larger, abstract and evil matrix of ideology – are evident.[7]

Why the Matrix must also believe in resistance is more difficult to determine, since, as a technological structure, its aim ought to be perfection. Yet what would be achieved once this perfection was reached but stasis? Continuation in and as stasis would in turn devalue the system to the degree of making it wasteful. Its symbolic continuity therefore demands the continual threat to this continuity – in the same way that the German theorist Jürgen Link (1997) postulates for all structures of normality.

Power, Thomas Bénatouïl reminds us, therefore results from the submission to the symbolic – not merely in the imagination, but by complete subscription to it – and by the inscription of oneself into it. In the surprising conclusion of his argument, which clearly derives from Louis Althusser's idea of "interpellation," he indeed claims that Neo, therefore, when immersing himself eventually into the world of machines in the final film in the trilogy, becomes a total subject, perhaps the only and ultimate subject in the film:

> Neo thus combines the total symbolic recognition of the code and the immediate and singular perception of the contents of the Matrix, the reverse and the front of its virtual reality: he *sees the structure* of each of the objects that surround him and the way in which they are produced by the Matrix, that which permits it to submit them to its will. (In Badiou et al., 2003: 40; my translation)

Level 3: What (Gender) Is the Matrix?

When Butler discusses the status of concepts such as "matrix" and "khora" (another term for receptacle) in theory, she pinpoints a mistake first prominently made by Julia Kristeva in her distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic (Butler, 1993: 41). For Kristeva, the semiotic is the phase of signification preceding so-called "thetic" assignations and positioning of meaning. These belong to the symbolic sphere from which rational argument operates (such as Kristeva's own critical thinking). The two-part model is closely based on Freud's initial distinction between unconscious and

[7] A. Samuel Kimball therefore claims, with reference to Michael Wood and Claude Lévi-Strauss, that the *Matrix* films function like myth in projecting a society's anxieties onto a symbolic plane. Yet he also stresses that the mythic shape does not resolve these anxieties, but merely repeats them in a ritual form. In this, the popular cultural myth would again function like a fetish (Kimball, 2001: 188-189).

conscious (a distinction also used by many critics of the *Matrix* films [e.g. Bénatouïl, in Badiou et al., 2003]), and as in Freud's model, there is no controlled return to the unconscious from consciousness. This only happens in lapses and dreams, moments evading the rational control of the individual. The radicalism of this thinking (often ignored by its pragmatic users, such as ego-psychologists) is that it questions the very existence of an autonomous human subject in control of its agency, and it does so – quite shockingly for rationalist thinkers in the Hegelian mode – from the very rationality that permits the inquiry in the first place. Again, one could be tempted to view this as an analogy to the *Matrix* films in which the strongest resistance against the ungraspable mechanisms of the Matrix ultimately comes from one of its most adapted elements, Thomas Anderson, who becomes Neo only by resisting.

Yet when Kristeva goes on to identify the semiotic with the maternal and feminine (and thus the matrix as in "womb"), she forgets the complexity of her own structure.[8] For the maternal and the feminine as well as the masculine are already symbolic structures. These (and only these, of course) can label and identify (in the *Matrix* films the most obvious hint at this is Trinity's statement to Neo "The Matrix cannot tell you who you are"), yet by doing so they position what they identify in the symbolic sphere. In the *Matrix* films the clearest evidence of this (and one that is fetishistically repeated in every trailer of each of the three films and repeatedly in the films) is the screen of running digital code. It only seemingly forms a soup of signs, a kind of amniotic fluid of information. In fact it upholds the rule of the symbol, since symbols are what it is made of – and what it produces. Thomas Bénatouïl mentions the character Cypher, who boasts that, with practice, one can forget the codes and instead see blondes, brunettes, and redheads. Yet Cypher's logic is self-defeating, since it replaces one form of symbolic code with another – a gendered and sexualised one, but a symbolic code nonetheless (in Badiou et al., 2003: 38).

Butler, despite the scepticism that underlies her analysis of gender, is not free from such a conflation of the semiotic and the symbolic either, especially as far as the matrix is concerned, which forms such a crucial plane

[8] Kristeva connects the maternal, especially the maternal body, with the semiotic, the realm prior to symbolization, throughout her seminal *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). In a later interview (Kristeva, 1989: 130), she states: "I believe that this archaic semiotic modality that I have referred to as infantile babblings, in order to give it clearer definition, is a modality which bears the most archaic memories of our link with the maternal body." One could argue, however, that "memories" are themselves signs and textual structures that, with Freud for instance, can be subjected to symbolic analysis.

for the operation of her concept of gender performativity. Unlike Slavoj Žižek, she carefully avoids positing a reality of the heterosexual matrix[9] and insists (with Luce Irigaray) on its discursive (re-)production. In terms of the *Matrix* films, she would thus be a proponent of the position that there is no outside the Matrix, that everything which happens inside the *Matrix* films, including the crucial resistance against the Matrix, is part of it.[10] Yet Butler, too, falls victim to the Matrix in ways that are not altogether different to Žižek's, when she writes in the second edition of *Gender Trouble*: "The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its 'natural' past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities" (1999: 119). Catherine Belsey duly compares this liberationist attitude to the American dream (2005: 12). It is also remarkably close to the many dreams (American or otherwise) that the *Matrix* films present to their characters and audiences as enticements to believe in the possibility of resistance and subversion. Yet the questions concerning a liberation from what and towards which new state of affairs remain as unclear as the *Matrix* films' position towards the identities they offer their protagonists – including, again and prominently, that of gender and sexuality. It is certainly not as simplistic (and frightening) as David Gerrold declares it to be in his introduction to a very unsatisfactory collection of essays entitled *Taking the Red Pill*: "Indeed, that's the point of the Matrix – that humanity has a choice, not just as a species, but as individuals as well. We can accept our roles as slaves of the machine, or we can reinvent ourselves as masters" (in Yaffeth, 2003: 3).

The Matrix as an omnipresent actor in the *Matrix* films is less self-reflexive than much contemporary theory, but also more consequential in that it manifests itself in men and women and as the heterosexual matrix that equals normality in the late twentieth century. Yet when it comes to creating and challenging the opposition on which its survival rests, it symbolically gives away the grounding of its functioning by making all its agents (including rogue agent Smith) exclusively male. This concession, however, should not trick us into believing that we are facing a Freudian lapse here, a hint at a suppressed truth or, worse, a reality underlying the structures of the Matrix. Offering us a largely gendered model of resistance, the *Matrix* films merely confront us with an echo of their persistent symbolic structures framed by (and erected fetishistically on the remains of) other symbolic

[9] Or at least a location for it, as his advice "traverse the fantasy" implies (Žižek, 1997: 30-31). Catherine Belsey uses this position to accuse Žižek of "subscription to idealism" (2005: 57).

[10] Thomas Bénatouïl (in Badiou et al., 2003 : 37) writes: "the battle between humans and machines mostly takes place in the virtual reality of the Matrix. It seems that the whole of humanity can only be liberated from the Matrix through the Matrix itself."

structures. We cannot even assume which of them is prior to which, as Butler does with reference to a supposed "past" of the body.

The answer to the trick question "What gender is the Matrix?" would therefore be impossible, since it leads back through the symbolic imposition of sex and gender. We can either accept one of two simple answers, both of which fall short of the question's full implications: 1. The Matrix is male, since it can only manifest its own resistance in symbolic terms; or 2. The Matrix is female, since the production of symbolic representations presupposes an underlying semiotic realm that, with Kristeva, we can identify as female.

Even less satisfactory, but closer to the bone of contention that is the central premise of the *Matrix* films, is the alternative meta-answer to the question, which is another question – in line with the levels upon levels of simulation that the films gesture at. It would read like this: the answer to the question "What gender is the Matrix?" can only be "What gender is the question – any question that is?" Since the symbolic is the only available realm of utterance for cultural meaning, it must be the plane from where interrogations of this cultural meaning stem. Butler expresses the dilemma as follows:

> Of course, strictly speaking, the receptacle can have no ontological status, for ontology is constituted by forms, and the receptacle cannot be one. And we cannot speak about that for which there is no ontological determination, or if we do, we use language improperly, imputing being to that which can have no being. So, the receptacle seems from the start to be an impossible word, a designation that cannot be designated. (Butler, 1993: 43)

No matter which gender the Matrix possesses (all or none), it ultimately has the final victory. Yet its victory is also its defeat. The only kind of dominance that is granted to virtuality is that it is condemned to forever (re-)produce its own virtuality. Even the supposed system failure at the end of the first *Matrix* film therefore failed to spell out its doom, since failure (as in abjection, dissidence, subversion and resistance) forms part of the system. In terms of gender, we may regard this as a curse, a play, or an opportunity, depending on which (symbolic) positions we prefer to recognise and to which we decide to subscribe.

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Section Four:

Theory

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MATRIX – THE NEW CONSTITUTION BETWEEN HARDWARE, SOFTWARE AND WETWARE

DENISA KERA

Abstract

The *Matrix* trilogy is a modern day titanomachia in which the replacement of generations of titans, gods and semi-gods, or hardware, software and wetware, tests the relations between the humans and the nonhumans. The supremacy of the humans and the machines is gradually replaced by the autonomy, dominance and then even anarchy of software. In this process, the function of the Matrix as a place populated by different human and nonhuman agents slowly transforms from the issues of colonization to the creation of a new collective. This essay discusses these emancipatory and posthumanist aspects of the *Matrix* trilogy in relation to posthumanist theory and earlier attempts to speak of active "nonhumanity," such as myths and fables. New forms of alterity to humans lead to the emergence of a new and open system, a more complex collective and society. The most important exploration of the posthuman alterity and the most significant forms of hybrids today is software and programming languages. Software brings together new heterogeneous elements in our world, as well as in the Matrix, in order to create a different and more complex society. It translates and enables interaction between different and even incompatible "worlds" of humans and machines, but also between myth, movie and posthumanist theory.

Our Jerusalem is made up of software, cities of God, bailiwicks of the Word, megalopolises of language exchanges. We are making ready for the kingdom of the spirit, the celestial Jerusalem or a classless society.

Wait, then, for the end of history to see the realization of the promise rise up at last. Passing from hardware to software, the material to the logic, the tower of Babel turns over, and with it the point of its text. In the old days, lack of completion used to come in whenever all was said and done… Nowadays, incompletion is the ordinary state of affairs, synthesis and unity finding themselves asymptotically. (Serres, 1995: 125)

The *Matrix* trilogy is a modern day titanomachia in which the replacement of generations of titans, gods and semi-gods or hardware, software and wetware tests the relations between the humans and the nonhumans. The supremacy of the humans replaced by the machines in the first part of the *Matrix* (1999) is gradually deferred by the autonomy, dominance (*The Matrix Reloaded*, 2003) and then even anarchy of software and different programs (*The Matrix Revolutions*, 2003). In the course of the movie, more and more nonhumans acquire agency and the ability to act for themselves and to pose new challenges to the established order.

This well-explored aspect of an "active" and even aggressive nonhumanity in SF literature has many parallels in various posthumanist theories. These are frequently trying to articulate a dynamic reality beyond human language, cognition and agency, such as the association of humans and things within the heterogeneous networks of the Actor Network Theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1988), machinic assemblages and transgressing new complexities, or rhizomes (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and similar ideas concerning technological and material alterity or even autonomous technological evolution (Kittler, 1997). The *Matrix* movies and cyberpunk literature further develop and help concretize a special class of nonhumans that are becoming more and more prominent in our world today, namely programs and software.

What is it about the software that dominates our imagination today and how does it relate to the issues of nonhumanity? Are programs different from other nonhuman agents? Should we understand software as the language nonhumans use to speak and perform their agency? Even if we do not want to go that far, software remains a special medium enabling faster translation between different agents, usually hardware and humans. It facilitates the rapid growth of new networks and collectives and blurs the difference between technology and politics and between technology and culture.

To understand the unique property of software we will examine it in the context of its various attempts to involve new agents and to give voice and activity to things we normally prefer to think of as passive. This posthumanist agenda culminates in Actor Network Theory (ANT) and its concepts of translation and creation of new "constitutions" linking humans with nonhumans (Latour, 1993) and with it the creation of a variety of quasi objects and subjects. Equally important is the context of the earlier attempts to surpass anthropocentrism and speak of "nonhumanity," such as myths and fables that demonstrate how the emergence of new forms of alterity in relation to humans always leads to new forms of emancipation and the emergence of open systems.

The Matrix (the place of programs portrayed in the movie), and software in general, are simply means to accelerate the creation of hybrids involving elements of nature, machines, people and texts. But the question is whether this new Babel, built on the universal language of software, is heading for the same fall as its predecessor? Are these disasters only symptoms of a growing and open system, as Michel Serres states in the epigrah above, and in his account of universal parasitism in the fables? To see software as the universal language of nonhumanity and the new Babel, or the Matrix, is to perceive all programming languages as being in a state of "permanent incompletion." The Matrix is universal but not perfect, it is simply open source.

The End of Anthropocentrism between Popular Culture and Theory

Active nonhuman entities are becoming an important topic in popular culture (SF film and cyberpunk literature) and various posthumanist theories. However, it is possible to trace this topic within the broader debate about anthropocentrism in genres such as myths and fables. In posthumanist theories, material agency is not simply a resistance to our will and knowledge but an evolving alterity that is in a "state" of becoming and reconfiguration. The discovery of independently existing objects and processes in the world outside of our minds and culture (as scientific realism defines nonhuman entities) involves for this reason also a negotiation and formation of new alliances and configurations with these alterities. For the posthumanist theories, the material exteriority is not a firm and stable ground outside of ourselves but a dynamic place for new inter- (and intra-) activity (Haraway, 1991; Barad 2003) and performativity (Pickering, 1995), merging together nature and culture, social and scientific elements.

The most influential attempt to bridge this divide between nature and culture on the ground of an active nonhumanity is Actor Network Theory (ANT), developed originally as an analysis of scientific and technological artifacts, by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and others. It establishes a methodology that connects the dominant paradigms today – scientific realism, social constructivism, discourse analysis – and their main territories: nature, power relations and texts. Two moments remain crucial in this transformation brought about by posthumanist theories and portrayed in the *Matrix* trilogy. The first is that slaves and all other passive elements (humans in the first part of the *Matrix*, programs in the second and third part) gradually become autonomous and active agents of change. The second is that the anarchy and the destruction threatening people, machines and

programs from all sides collaborate in the creation of a new equilibrium. These two moments summarize the basic assumptions of ANT as the most clearly stated critique of anthropocentrism today. First there is symmetry between all agents, human and nonhuman, and second there is autopoiesis of heterogeneous networks involving humans and nonhumans.

The symmetric relations between the different agents and the possibility of ever evolving networks that are formed by, but which also create, new actors, make it impossible to distinguish between nature and culture, facts and constructions, subjects and objects, humans and machines. ANT is trying to overcome the anthropocentric bias presented by these distinctions and instead points out the importance of networks and hybrids. Such networks are very similar to the Matrix as portrayed in the movies, where, at first, the Matrix is simply a place in which software organizes the relations between humans and machines. However its function slowly transforms in the sequels, from a focus on issues of the colonization of humans to a focus on what the most important theorist of ANT and nonhumanity, Bruno Latour, describes as the creation of a new Constitution.

This new Constitution displays above all the heterogeneous character of a world in which different actors, agents or actants (programs, humans, machines etc.) are all part of the same network of co-dependence. This, together with other similar concepts in Latour (1999) relating to political ecology, experimental anthropology and even cosmopolitics, expands the initial descriptive character of ANT, from a mainly normative to an almost manifesto-like understanding. While ANT only follows the actors and their interactions which are creating the new networks and hybrids, Latour's more recent concepts try to establish a political program that spells out how to live together and form new collectives with nonhumans. The "Parliament of Things" (Latour, 1993) and its new Constitution rely on emergent technological and posthuman agents who involve the whole cosmos in ever-changing collectives.

The *Matrix* movies serve almost as an icon of these posthumanist ideas and manifestos. For the new and uncertain Constitution between humans, machines and programs it is crucial that Neo gradually refuses all established arrangements. As "Mr. Anderson" he does not fit into the Matrix world, where the humans are controlled by the machines. He also repeatedly rejects the role of the One or Neo that will save the humans from the machines. His refusal to execute the order given to him by the Architect, which would reduce him to some kind of special "backup" software, is very dramatic. In the second part of the trilogy he refuses to return and reinstall the source code and destroy the "emergent anomaly" in the Matrix. The emancipation of humans but also that of the machines and of software is more than an

"unbalanced equation inherent in the programming of the Matrix." Neo's goal is neither a new "harmony of mathematical precision" nor the ultimate victory of Zion over the machines (as we learn at the end of the trilogy) but to use the anomaly as a possibility for a new Matrix and a new collective.

In a similar fashion, all actants have to work together to shape the ever-changing equilibrium that Bruno Latour calls "cosmopolitics," or in Michel Serres' words, the "collective." The crucial role in this is played by what both, Latour and Serres, refer as to "quasi-objects." The heterogeneous agents that belong to the different and often incompatible worlds and spheres of influence are often at the same time social, natural and discursive phenomena. In the case of the *Matrix* trilogy we even see hybrid subjects who are both humans and programs, like Agent Smith, or who belong to the Matrix, Zion and the Machine world at the same time, like Neo.

The ultimate "quasi-object" in the world of the Matrix and, increasingly, in our own world today, is becoming the computer code which increases the possibility of translation and interaction between different actants. It is the most crucial element in the pursuit of a new Constitution which will have to settle disputes between humans, machines and programs. Furthermore, the code as a "quasi-object" bridges the divide not only between humans and machines but even between structure and genesis (event), theory and practice, language (interpretation) and performance, and between politics (theory) and technology. Computer code simply consists of signs that can be executed; these signs also have the capacity of being events, which breaches all the rules and discussions that govern the relationship between "ordinary" language and being, mind and body, spirit and matter etc. Software always creates new collectives of heterogeneous agents and its function is similar to the one of the Matrix, namely to introduce new agents, connect them with the established order and then to transgress this order.

The Matrix *Trilogy as a Modern-Day Titanomachia*

To understand software dynamics and the importance of active nonhumans, both in the Matrix and in our world, we will use the metaphor of titanomachia. It seems that every century needs a new form of titanomachia and the *Matrix* movies might constitute our 21st-century version. The previous titanomachia, the one that informs both Hegel and Marx, influenced large parts of the 19th and the entire 20th century. The clashes between generations of gods, nations and social classes acquire a new form today, influenced by science fiction and cyberpunk motifs relating to the replacement of humans by nonhumans.

Very often, the teleological topos in similar myths is overemphasized to the detriment of the emancipatory function they serve. There is an important difference between the *Matrix* myth and ancient Greek mythology or the Christian gospels, to mention only the two most powerful ones. While Greek mythology relativized the relation between the generations of old and new gods, and to a certain degree between humans and gods (cf. the stories of heroes who become gods), it left unquestioned the relation between slaves and citizens. The Christian gospels went further in questioning the difference between humans and God as well as amongst humans themselves and they offered a strong case for abolishing slavery and for setting up equality amongst humans. The *Matrix* trilogy follows this emancipatory theme by focusing on the most important division of our time, namely the one between humans and nonhumans, be they animals, machines or simply other. Every new division weakens the importance of previous ones, so that arguably social status and people's race may no longer be a major issue when machines are seen to be treating everyone equally.

In this respect, the *Matrix* trilogy compels us to rethink the function of myth. Myth does not only constitute a legend but also offers a new vision of the "collective." It creates new relations and establishes justice where there was none. This is done by initiating a new connection between formerly incompatible agents (humans and gods, humans and machines, etc.) and by giving voice and value to something that did not have either before. The slaves of the past and the machines and other nonhuman agents of today share a similar fate and also a resistance because they are usually kept "invisible." By making them "visible" we are forced to reconsider the order of the world. Such attempts to bring and mix together the unthinkable constitute not only an exercise of our imagination but also an experiment of emancipation, usually provoked by a powerful new myth like the one that informs the *Matrix* trilogy.

The world of the *Matrix* is structured through relations between hardware, software and wetware. The Matrix is their "constitution." All sides depend on the rules of the Matrix; it is the interface through which they communicate and also fight each other. While the humans fight for the freedom of their species, the machines fight for preserving their energy source and the programs fight for defending their autonomy. What remains important is that there are no winners in this digital titanomachia in the *Matrix* but only a new status quo in which the Matrix becomes something like a reloaded and re-written (in codes and words) political and evolutionary constitution, another stage within the symbiogenesis between humans, machines and programs. Neo's sacrifice, at the end of *The Matrix Revolutions*, resembles the crucifixion of Christ, the act of a new contract.

While in the gospel scenario it is a new contract between God and humans, in the case of the *Matrix* trilogy it is a new contract between the worlds of humans, machines and programs.

The Christ-like as well as the "machinelike and softwarelike" Neo transgresses the boundaries between the disparate worlds and becomes a hybrid subject. Neo is someone who not only reads the code of the Matrix but lives it and even changes it. He simply translates between different domains of being, the "machinic," the "human" (genetic) and the digital, between information and energy. He is thus able to create a new equilibrium.

The *Matrix* taps into the most important myth of our time because it encourages us to take care of what could be seen as the "other" immigrants within our world, namely machines and programs and all the new entities (agents) that have started to populate our world ever since the 16th and 17th centuries and the rise of modern science:

> Modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of "man" or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of "nonhumanity" – things, or objects, or beasts... (Latour, 1993: 13)

Detachment from anthropocentrism goes hand in hand with this proliferation of quasi-objects and hybrids in the movie as well as in the dominant contemporary myths of our world. Software is only the most recent emancipatory tool that serves the same function as myth, namely to create a new, hybrid collective. How to articulate this collective, the new configurations and constitutions which appear in the posthuman world? How to interpret the incompletion and instability of such networks? To answer these questions, we will need to take a closer look at the literary genre which involves both issues: anthropocentrism and hybridity, namely the fable. Similar to myth, the fable connects humans with nonhumans. It connects animal stories with human stories and thus speaks of hybridity but also of parasitism and even system complexity.

Myths, Fables, Movies, Games and Their Parasites

> One furnishes energy; the other information. One gives the force to work; the other, the directions. Matter and voice. Again this is an iniquitous exchange, but it works in history and not only in comedy… (Serres, 1982: 37)

This is also valid for the *Matrix* movies: the unjust exchange that is happening between the Matrix and Zion is the same as the one that occurs

between the village and the town in the fable, for example between the town mouse and the country mouse. In both cases there is a gradual development towards a universal story of collective parasitism. Michel Serres uses similar fables to speak of system complexity and to outline his idea of a "collective." In his opinion, the heterogeneity of elements and parasitism are typical properties of all open and complex systems inclined to changes. La Fontaine and Aesop were the first system theorists to articulate this idea. It could be added that stories about parasites are also a prelude to the new machine fable: the *Matrix* movies.

Serres demonstrates how, in fables, animals are not simply mimicking human social relations. Quite the opposite, the social and the moral phenomena are summarized under the problem of the "parasite" and they illustrate a system theory that is neither about humans nor about animals. Cybernetics is simply a continuation of these fables. Both question anthropocentrism and both want to offer an alternative to it. Fables could in fact be called "second-order cybernetics." Not only do they represent humans, animals and machines as part of one system, with their "feedback loops, signal transmission and goal seeking behavior," but they act as parts of a constantly changing open system which is autopoietic, or self-making (Hayles, 1996: 11-12).

This autopoietic quality is repeatedly emphasized by Serres through his concept of the parasite as a hybrid entity which brings about a new order. The unbalanced relation between the host and the parasite is always a source of a new order mediating and transforming the personal and the collective identities into a new, unstable network, a quasi-object or a collective. The system complexity is simply unthinkable without the concept of the parasite and its synonyms, like for example noise:

> The parasite invents something new. Since he does not eat like everyone else, he builds a new logic… He obtains energy and pays for it in information… He establishes an unjust pact; relative to the old type of balance, he builds a new one. He speaks in a logic considered irrational up to now, a new epistemology and a new theory of equilibrium… (Serres, 1982: 35-6)

The initial division between energy and information, humans and machines, manual and intellectual labor, matching the old relation between town and countryside, between producers and parasites is also the source of a new order in the *Matrix*. In the first part of the *Matrix* trilogy we are left to believe that the Matrix serves the machines in their colonization of the human race and that Neo will help the humans to take control over the Matrix and destroy humanity's parasites, the machines. What is important to see in the fables as well as in the movie is how this relation slowly changes and

becomes unclear because it is seen to be involved in a larger ecology or a universal parasitism that ceases to be a moral question and instead becomes a question of system complexity:

> It so happens that this collective was given a form of an animal: Leviathan. We are certainly within something bestial; in more distinguished terms we are speaking of an organic model for the members of a society. (Serres, 1982: 10)

Town mouse and country mouse exchange their position in the fable when the rich landlord appears on the scene and introduces another type of parasitism, namely the one between humans and mice, between the rich and the poor. Similarly, the parasitic relations between the machines, programs and humans change several times in the *Matrix* trilogy. In the first part of the trilogy a first shift occurs when Agent Smith expresses his opinion about humans:

> I'd like to share a revelation I had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species… You move to an area and you multiply until every natural resource is consumed. The only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague, and we are the cure. (Wachowski, 1999)

The humans are dangerous viruses who destroy the planet and it is the machines who are trying to prevent this from happening (again). This shift in perception gradually displays the universal parasitism of the whole Matrix. Most clearly in the second part of the trilogy, where we realize that the Matrix is a much more autonomous zone, independent from machines as well as from humans. It is a place of diversity of interests and almost an anarchy of different programs, a real digital Leviathan.

There are programs that parasitize other programs like the Merovingian and his mafia spreading terror but also saving "unwanted" programs like the exile program, the girl Sati. She is a special program that has to escape from being deleted because she was not created by the source but by two programs that fell in love. At the end of the trilogy she is the one that starts the first new sunrise after Neo "saved" the Matrix. Sati represents a new type of program, made by other programs, hybrid objects or subjects that promise a new evolution. She is a program that serves neither machines nor humans but opens up a possibility of an entirely new collective.

The Merovingian does not serve anyone either. He is a powerful, old program which wants to keep the status quo and refuses change. He is able to

"create" new programs like Sati but his "creations" are about control and not love, see for example the little "dessert" he creates to seduce a woman in the restaurant and to illustrate his strange views on causality and power:

> Watch – you see, I have sent her dessert, a very special dessert. I wrote it myself. It starts so simply, each line of the program creating a new effect, just like poetry… Beneath our poised appearance, the truth is we are completely out of control. Causality. There is no escape from it, we are forever slaves to it. Our only hope, our only peace is to understand it, to understand the "why." "Why" is what separates us from them, you from me. "Why" is the only real social power, without it you are powerless. And this is how you come to me, without "why," without power. Another link in the chain. But fear not, since I have seen how good you are at following orders, I will tell you what to do next. (Wachowksi, 2003a)

Since the Merovingian is the "trafficker of information," he knows the reason for everything that happens in the Matrix; yet his view on causality reduces information to what gives immediate power in different situations. His talk on social power and control is very different from the one we hear in the conversation between Councilor Haman and Neo. While the Merovingian hints at the unequal relation between – to use Serres' terminology - information and energy, parasites and their victims, channels and sources, relations and contents, Councilor Haman speaks of their interdependence and relativity.

On the engineering level of Zion, where Neo and Haman have this important discussion, we see the primitive-looking machines that represent the mechanical infrastructure of Zion, which helps the population to survive. It is another type of power and control that Councilor Haman and Neo name:

> Haman: Almost no one comes down here. Unless of course there's a problem. That's how it is with people They don't care how it works as long as it works. I like it down here. I like to be reminded that the city survives because of these machines. These machines are keeping us alive, while other machines are coming to kill us. Interesting isn't it? Power to give, and the power to end it.
> Neo: We have the same power.
> Haman: Yeah, I suppose we do, but down here I think about all those people still plugged into the Matrix, and when I look at these machines I… I can't help thinking that in a way we… are plugged into them.
> Neo: But we control these machines, they don't control us.
> Haman: Of course not. How could they? The idea is pure nonsense but, it does make one wonder just… what is control?
> Neo: If we wanted we could shut these machines down.

> Haman: Of course. That's it. You've hit it. That's control isn't it? If we wanted, we could smash them to bits. Although if we did, we'd have to consider what would happen to our lights, our heat, our air. (Wachowski, 2003a)

While the humans are enslaved within the machine world by software, machines and programs act as slaves in the human world of Zion. When all sides become conscious of this interdependence, the parasitic exchange between humans, programs and machines develops into a story about the new meaning of the "collective." The parasitic metaphors and tropes in Michel Serres and in the *Matrix* open up a new view of the collective as a universal parasitism that changes, transgresses and moves the whole system into new directions.

The importance of the new collective is clearly shown in the last part of the trilogy when Agent Smith turns into a dangerous virus and threatens to destroy everyone. What is only hinted at in the first part when Agent Smith tells Neo how tired he is of hunting people and serving the Matrix, quickly develops into the main threat to all three worlds. The important battle happens neither in Zion nor on the surface of the destroyed planet where the machines dwell, but inside the software where new parasites seem to appear every day. The "town" (Matrix) and the "countryside" (Zion) exchange their functions in the course of the film and introduce the same problem of a system complexity that we find in Serres.

It is difficult to decide what the positive meaning of the new equilibrium or the "collective" that is the transitory outcome of system complexity might be. At the end of the introduction to the "Rat's meal" Michel Serres presents this as the "general question" of system complexity and the parasite: "Are we in the pathology of systems or in their emergence and evolution?" (Serres, 1982: 14). At the end of each chapter this question returns in more radical form. In "Satyr's meal" Serres cannot even decide who is the sender and who the receiver, who is the parasite and who the guest: "we don't know what belongs to the system, what makes it up and what is against the system, interrupting and endangering it. Whether the diagram of the rats is generative or corrupting" (1982: 16). In the same way, we cannot decide in the second and third part of the *Matrix* whether we are facing system pathology, exchange of systems or a new equilibrium.

The question of "pathology or evolution" remains unanswered by the movie, because it is unanswerable in our present situation. We can agree with the diagnosis of many ANT theorists that we live in networks involving things, humans, texts and other actors which are irreducible to each other, but we cannot state anything beyond that. Even when Serres, in the epigraph to this essay, talks of incompletion being the ordinary state of affairs and

"synthesis and unity finding themselves asymptotically," this remains a description and cannot serve as a program.

The *Matrix,* like other fables and myths, transgresses the limits of anthropocentrism and maybe that is its most important function. It is unclear where this will lead but this process already started a long time ago and now seems inevitable. It is difficult to decide whether we should be teaching ourselves to somehow step outside of ourselves and think of these new agents as a part of a new collective or whether we are, inevitably, still merely anthropomorphizing machines. In any case, we can only hope that the Matrix we are creating is not dominated by the kind of control the Merovingian is proposing, but is more concerned with bringing about peace and a new and just constitution that may serve all agents involved in building a common world.

This positive view is developed by Bruno Latour, who describes the new constitution and political ecology as a collective work in progress. He uses the metaphor of an experiment:

> We shall say, then, that the collective as a whole is defined from now on as collective experimentation… The collective does not claim to know, but it has to experiment in such a way that it can learn in the course of the trial. (Latour 2004: 196)

His vision of the Matrix is "simple passages from one version of the collective to the following version" (2004: 189), a "meticulous triage of the possible worlds, of the cosmograms, always to begin anew" (195), in which we include more and more aliens. The only other option we have is to ignore these aliens and agents and to behave like Victor in *Frankenstein* who flees from his laboratory, abandoning the "creature to itself, on the pretext that, like all innovations, it was born monstrous" (Latour, 2004: 193).

This message of inclusion of all agents and of creating evolving collectives is well illustrated by the *Matrix* trilogy and the ecology of different media "parasites" through which it develops. The movies refer to cyberpunk literature and are themselves "recycled" in animations and computer games and continue their lives in numerous discussion lists, philosophy books, fanzines etc. The symbiosis of different media and genres around the *Matrix* is also part of the "message" of the movie: there is no hierarchy and no control, only an infinite play of networks and new "collectives" involving more and more aliens and parasites.

Codes, Fractals and Performativity

The cross-mediatization of the *Matrix* movies and their parasitic theme highlights the important aspects of all open and heterogeneous systems, namely hybridity and the role of nonhuman agents. Apart from myths and fables, the most important exploration of this posthuman alterity and the most significant hybrid agent today are programming languages. Software brings together the heterogeneous and new elements in our world as well as in the Matrix to create new collectives. Like any hybrid object it translates and enables interaction between the different and hitherto incompatible "worlds" of humans and machines.

The importance of programs in our world today is comparable to the situation in the Matrix. Programs have the ability to "re-write" and make evolve the existing order and the current "version of the collective," and thus to create complex human-machine interactions. New hybrids and collectives emerge with every new software and system like for example P2P (peer-to-peer) or social software communities. Software has become the leading force behind all the transformations in our world. Not only does it run our economies and cities but it changes our laws and notions of property or other values and beliefs. The "Parliament of Things" which Latour envisions to express his idea of a political involvement of nonhumans is actually a "Parliament of codes" which brings the "aliens" into our world and shapes new collectives.

What makes all of this possible is the hybrid nature of code which is apparent even at the level of programming languages. Programming languages resemble natural languages used by humans but they do not serve communication among people. In fact, they are not at all about communication and representation. Their signs produce events and generative processes and this performativity connects our language and thinking with the machine processes and it creates complex interactions and even systems of interdependence.

In contemporary theory, linguistics and social sciences, performativity has become an influential concept that is used to articulate the different roles of extralinguistic elements. It points towards social institutions, conventions and rituals (in linguistic pragmatics and sociolinguistics) but also to iterability which allows differentiation. The notion of performativity as iterability of signs explains how meaning or identity are always generated rather than represented or constructed (Derrida, 1982; Butler, 1997). ANT uses this concept of performativity to explain not only meaning and identity but eventually to build a whole new ontology. Performativity in ANT makes us realize that the matter and the world outside are not given or passive but

are active agents with whom we interact to re-create new worlds and collectives (Barad, 2003). Pickering (1995) describes this situation as "the mangle" of human and material agency, in which they both play from time to time active and passive roles. In a similar fashion all actors (actants) in Latour (1999) are defined by their performance and constant transformations.

The ultimate example of performativity as interaction with new actors, as explained, are programming languages, not only because their codes use signs to produce effects but also because they translate and connect machines with humans as well as machines with other machines. The move towards a hybrid and performative nature of code is plainly expressed at the beginning of each *Matrix* movie. In the first part it is the simple binary code on someone's computer that represents all communication systems today. This initial scene where the codes only serve transmissions of information changes in the second part to code as simulation of reality. Binary code becomes a fractal, even energy, and this reveals its performative potential. The cryptic "Chinese" signs represent this transformation in which signs are not discrete anymore but holistic, almost monads of the universe. They do not represent meaning through binary oppositions but generate new "meaning" through their fractal-like appearance. Codes as simulation become a universal creative force that can bridge the difference between any worlds and create new hybrids. It even bridges the difference between old and new machines so that old clocks, telephones and even trains play an important role in exporting and importing programs to the world of humans and machines.

Because of these properties of code, the Matrix cannot simply be understood in sociological or ethical terms and questions. The "new information order" brought about by the Matrix, whether in the movies or in the real world, is simply an order of code that is always generative and emergent: none of its values are given in advance. In cryptography and logic, both predecessors to computer code, "efficient code" was usually envisioned as language abstracted from social practice, tradition and representation. Artificial languages were never just meant to represent the existing knowledge and the existing world, but to enhance knowledge and create a better world. They were often seen as the solution to problems like social fragmentation, as for example in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War (Batchelor, 1999). However, the idea of code has in fact always been about enabling communication and translation between various systems of knowledge, languages, cultures and even different forms of being, like machines and humans. Code creates new hybrids and new collectives which will change our notions of ethics, politics and also theory.

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THE *MATRIX* TRILOGY AND THE TRIUMPH OF VIRTUAL REASON – TERRITORIALIZED TOPOI, NOMADIC LINES

SALAH EL MONCEF BIN KHALIFA

Abstract

This essay proposes to analyze the paradoxical character of the Matrix in the Wachowski *Matrix* trilogy. With its monadic structure, the Matrix presents itself as a seemingly dystopian, "closed totality" – an unsurpassable horizon (Louis Marin). Upon further scrutiny, however, the urban landscape in the *Matrix* films turns out to be a construct riddled with potential points of rupture and nomadic lines of flight pointing outward beyond what will be referred to as the "autopoietic" monad of simulations (Varela), toward the "desert of the real," as Morpheus calls it (echoing Baudrillard). It is this interplay that this essay wants to deal with: the problematic tension between the "territorializing"/ "paranoid pole" of the Matrix as gridded, totalizing structure – a machinic world of simulacra projected as second nature – and its "deterritorializing"/ "schizoid pole" – an immanent topology of fuzzy (information) flows and fractal lines of bifurcation unfolding beyond the Matrix's automated infrastructure (Deleuze & Guattari). As far as the latter pole is concerned, the essay focuses on the architectonics of the "*promesse de bonheur*" incarnated in Neo's at once messianic and "Platonic" awakening to the fallacies of the Matrix and to the existence of a realm of authenticity and polymorphous difference (the "heterotopic" Zion) beyond the Matrix's field of fantasy constructions, its screen of representations (Foucault).

You are only… a copy from a matrix. (Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solaris*)

"Your conclusion," said Sancho, "I do not understand; but, well I know, that, while I sleep, I am troubled neither with fear nor hope, nor toil nor glory; and praise be to him who invented sleep, which is the mantle that shrouds all human thoughts, the food that dispels hunger, the drink that quenches thirst, the fire that warms the cold, the cool breeze that moderates heat; in a word,

> the general coin that purchases every commodity; the weight and balance that makes the shepherd even with his sovereign, and the simple with the sage: there is only one bad circumstance, as I have heard, in sleep; it resembles death." (Miguel de Cervantes, *The Adventures of Don Quixote de la Mancha*)

Even after a second viewing of the Wachowskis' trilogy, and notwithstanding its hopelessly definitive mood of dystopian closure (the banishment of almost all pockets of diversity), we still find ourselves struggling with certain unsolvable ambiguities and paradoxes at the core of *The Matrix*. Let us start with a first paradox – precisely the one that has to do with the Matrix as totalizing, or closed, topos. With its ever-expanding field of imbricate machinic, graphic, and mathematical constructs, the virtual network (reticular, like crystal growth, in its virtual deployment) presents itself in the form of a seemingly "closed totality" – an unsurpassable horizon that marks not only the end of the public sphere as a terrain of antagonism driven by history (the ideological, the socioeconomic, the political), but one that also inaugurates the literal reduction of the *res publica* to a phantasmic projection (Marin, 1993: 420).[1] Upon further investigation, however, and despite its clearly "autopoietic"[2] movement of "closed development" and "converge[ence]" (the integration of difference into sameness), the Wachowskis' monadic system turns out to be more than just a "reflexive monad" (Deleuze, 1990: 111, 122-23).[3] That is why it would be more accurate to conceptualize it as a paradoxical space, precisely: a totalizing, integrative cybertopology, but a cybertopology traversed by various horizontal points of rupture and nomadic lines of flight pointing toward the

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[1] See also Louis Marin's concept of "accomplished utopia" (1973: 20). In appropriating Karl Mannheim's approach, Marin elaborates on the "tension" in "modern Utopia" between "[dystopian] frontier and [utopian] horizon, totality and infinity, limit and transcendence, closure and liberty... Utopia as ideology is a totality; and when political power seizes it, it becomes a totalitarian whole... [T]he term invented by More [also represents] the limits of any state, any institution – I mean that which limits their totalitarian desire for absolute power: in Utopia, we can see the unfigurable figure of Infinite Liberty" (Marin, 1993: 406, 413, 420). See also Mannheim's theorization of the dystopian potential inherent in utopian "ideology" (1946: 55-108, 192-263) and Fredric Jameson's elaboration on Mannheim's theory (1981: 281-99).

[2] My appropriation of Francisco J. Varela's concept in relation to *The Matrix* as reflexive monad is loose, referring primarily to the principle of systemic self-reflexivity (Varela, 1979: 30-40, 260-78).

[3] See also Deleuze and Guattari (1980: 325ff.) on the "plane of immanence" as a field of "proliferation" which is also a field of closed "involution" rather than "evolution."

"desert of the real" – the polymorphous material space that stretches beyond the Architect's self-referential island of illusions. (Let us also note that this insular system is articulated on two levels: autopoietically replicating robots on a "hard" level; and, on a "soft" level, computer programs,[4] simulated urban spaces, and cybermachinic bodies projected as specular simulations of their dormant cyborg doubles in the "Machine World.")

One of my key working assumptions here revolves around a major philosophical implication originating in the above paradox: the problematic relation between the Matrix as a "paranoid pole" of "territorialization" (totalizing system) and the nomadic tribe of Zion as a "schizoid pole" of "deterritorialization – a force subverting the totality through the affirmation of singularity and the intensity of the contingent event.[5] Having said that, I would like to specify that my aim is not to conceptualize the tension in question within the framework of such dialectical categories as "inside" vs. "outside" (Adorno, 1973: 3-57), "wetware" vs. "virtualized flesh" (Kroker & Weinstein, 1994: 31 ff., 36), "cyborg" vs. biological organism (Haraway, 1991: 149-81), or "posthuman" self vs. humanist subject (Hayles, 1999: 1-24, 247-91). Rather, I propose to theorize the bipolar dynamic that animates the

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[4] See Cornelius Castoriadis on the "fantastic autonomization of techno-science, which Jacques Ellul has the imprescriptible merit of having formulated as early as 1947 and which scientists and nonscientists alike mask under the illusion of the separability of 'means' and 'ends," thereby purveying the false idea that another 'master' might be able to give technoscientific evolution another direction. But this set of practices, potentialities, and forms of knowledge which fabricates laboratories and lab assistants, inventors, imitators and researchers, apocalyptic weapons, test-tube babies, and real-life monsters, poisons and medicines – this supermegamachine is dominated by no one. No one controls it, and, in the present state of things, the question whether someone would be able to control it is not even raised. With technoscience, modern man believes he has been granted mastery. In reality, if he 'masters' a growing number of limited areas of interest, he is less powerful than ever over the *totality of the effects* of his actions, precisely because these actions have multiplied to such a great extent and because they affect strata of physical and biological Being about which he knows nothing.... The reigning conditions of privatization and 'individualism' give free rein, in the first place, to the arbitrariness of the Apparatuses and, at a deeper level, to the autonomized march of technoscience" (Castoriadis, 1991: 271; my emphasis). See also Dupuy (2002: 65-76, 129-45) and Joy (2000).

[5] See Deleuze and Guattari (1975: 329ff.) on the "two poles of the delirium: the paranoid... and the schizoid," and on the "despotic regime" of paranoia (1980: 142 ff.). Concerning the intensity of the event, see Ernst Bloch on the "relation of tension between an alogical intensity and a logical law" (1975: 69-79); and Maurice Blanchot on the "intensity [of] disaster" and its "exteriority" to all systems of conceptualization or representation (1980: 12).

cyclical history of *The Matrix* as the sum of two parallel conceptual vectors, or paradigms, which intersect *within* the virtual city-state: on the one hand, a dominant paradigm based on the hegemonic logic of sameness and predictability; on the other, a recessive paradigm (cf. Williams, 1980: 37-42; and Laclau & Mouffe, 1990: 65-71) grounded in the counterhegemonic logic of difference, catastrophic events, and unpredictable system shifts (cf. Moncef, 2002: 126-138). In the Oracle's words, this pregnant core of antagonism[6] inherent in the Architect's monadic construct – the productive frictions between his manic strivings "to balance the equation" and Zion's struggle to "unbalance" it (*Matrix Revolutions*) – is what defines the Matrix as an immanent topology in the Deleuzian sense (1990: 98ff.; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980: 325ff.), a field of mathematical predictability and integrated information "flows" (Serres, 1982: 150) disrupted by fractal lines of flight emerging from within the system and unfolding beyond the control of its machinic infrastructures, its police apparatuses, and its strategies of systemic containment.

In dealing with this nomadic dimension of the Matrix, it is also important to keep in mind the linkage between Neo's awakening[7] and the messianic "*promesse de bonheur*" expressed in such an awakening – the promise of a communal covenant[8] forged in the tribe's "other spaces:" Zion's "heterotopian" loci of fractal "deviation," the lines and nodes of singularity that it traces in the desert of the real, at the "interstitial" frontiers of the Matrix's field of fantasy constructions (Foucault, 1994: 757).[9] The world presented to our contemplation in the *Matrix* trilogy is in this sense a topology of "incompossible" articulations rather than dialectical oppositions: it is a domain where two adjacent spheres of existential, experiential, and organizational modes are engaged in a constant movement of convergence

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[6] In this essay, I use the concept of antagonism primarily in relation to Adorno's theory of "antagonistic system" (1973: 10). See also Castoriadis (1987: 115-64) and Laclau and Mouffe (1990: 103).

[7] On the Platonic resonances of Neo's awakening, see Irwin (2002: 11ff).

[8] Concerning the relationship between the (divine) promise and the utopian nature of messianic vision, see Bensaïd (1992: 201-14) and Goux (1978: 31-51). The trilogy's at once religious and historical references to the connection between messianism, utopianism, and the covenant of the community/commonwealth of the elect cannot be overstated (cf. Bercovitch, 1978: 16ff). On the relationship between the (spiritual) "covenant" and the (political) "compact" in the Puritan conception of the communal bond, see Miller (1981: 91ff). On the promissory character of the contractual form, see Derrida (1986) and De Man (1979: 246-77).

[9] See also Certeau on the concept of atopia as a cognitive model for "spaces [that are] indefinitely other [and] unknown to the 'geometric' or 'geographic' space of visual constructions, panoptical or theoretical" (1977: 5).

and divergence (Deleuze, 1990: 111ff.; Deleuze, 1988: 79ff.). Like the Matrix, the tribe of Zion depends heavily on artificial environments, machines, and technologies of simulation for its existence, and many of its citizens do retain core ontogenetic and existential aspects of their machinic life before emancipation (convergence);[10] at the same time, however, the nomadic community differs radically from the logic and practices of the Matrix on certain founding aspects of individual and collective freedom, not least of which the inalienable freedom to be different and to choose a communal contract founded in a pluralistic regime of self-governance (divergence). As we learn from the final exchange between the Oracle and the Architect, it is ultimately these foundational components of Zion's democratic and libertarian covenant that Neo secures partially in his Promethean agreement with the maker of the Matrix (*Revolutions*). It is only in the light of this Oedipal confrontation[11] that the playful ambiguity of the title *Revolutions* acquires its full implications: revolutions in the sense of cyclical (re)turn (cf. the Architect's cynically aporetic conception of "historical" movement as hamster-wheel histrionics); and revolutions in the sense of change (Neo's show of Hegelian cunning in his use of systemic double bind to introduce the difference that makes a difference).

Considering the unimpressive outcome of the Wachowskis' decidedly non-dialectical "revolution" (return of the same with a slight difference), it is easy to underestimate the last-minute intervention of the One. And yet the systemic and political alternatives to the shift that he brings about are painfully easy to guess: left to its immanent designs and (dys)functionings, the Matrix (through its autonomously replicating Agent Smith) would have

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[10] It is worth adding here that the citizens of Zion can only enter the world of virtual projections generated by the Matrix on condition of transforming themselves into simulacra. In this respect, the rebels' revolutionary effort is itself subjected to the logic of virtual reason.

[11] My reference to Oedipus here deserves some qualification. I am using the Oedipal subtext in this essay with Jean-Joseph Goux's brilliant study in mind, and more particularly his theorization of Oedipus's challenge of the Sphinx as the marker of a twofold epistemological *rupture*: a historiographical rupture (the break with ritual and its repetitive cyclical conception of individual subject and collectivity); and a philosophical-existential rupture (the affirmation of the thinking subject's capacity for a self-founding act of *sovereign individuation*, with the power of the subject to project its ego within an unbounded space of [self-]reflection as one of the key attributes of such sovereignty). In his break with all previous "initiands" and their self-subjection to/self-effacement through the rule of ritual, Oedipus thus inaugurates the birth of the "modern subject" in its fully [self-] reflexive capacity to "live out other possibles" and break with the cycles of historical repetition and with the archetypal unindividuation of ritual (Goux, 1990b: 91-126).

gone on squelching every possible pocket of difference down to the most basic elements of physical and ontological individuation – articulating itself as a radically monadic structure of compossibility driven by the runaway convergence of even the most superficial aspects of individuality toward one single category of virtual being: Agent Smith. The implications of this reverse declination process (from the plural to the radical singular) evidently extend beyond the ontological. Indeed, as is shown in the abyssal scene where Smith goes literally extinct (*Revolutions*), the seriate replication of sameness (the agent at last becoming "everyone and no one" [*Matrix*]) and the integrative gridding underlying such replication are chilling testimony to the structural vulnerability, the logical paucity, and the self-destructiveness of the Matrix – a system where the *Gestapo*-like techniques of total panoptical visibility through digital surveillance[12] can only result in the ultimate form of integration: an exponential, reticular movement of gridding marking the supersession of the most elemental binary categories of the *polis*, however phantasmic they have become (public sphere vs. private sphere, extimacy vs. intimacy, objectivity vs. subjectivity, otherness vs. selfhood). And when during the final fight an enraged (and apparently surprised) Smith asks Neo why he is still putting up a fight for the mere possibility of free will and difference expressed in a parallel system, the ironic stab at the Architect's demonic city-state is scathing (*Revolutions*). Indeed, for all the danger that he now represents, Smith is after all the most "evolved" logical derivative of the Architect's "design": An exponentially territorializing, convergent system-within-the-system – a system which, left to pursue its autopoietic movement of expansive integration to its ultimate limit, would have certainly absorbed the last margin of difference, condemning the Matrix to an implosive death by sameness. What this means in political terms (as opposed to systemic logic) is the end of the contractual form – be it as simulacrum (the Matrix) or as utopian ideal erupting within the interstitial spaces of the totalitarian system (Zion). Beyond the Councilor's wishful claim that Zion is free to "shut off" its apparatuses and Morpheus' shaky appeal to affirm "humanity" against "these machines" (*Matrix Reloaded*), it is Neo's last intervention that preserves the significant difference between Zion and the world of illusions; and it is in the conceptual terrain where the systemic and the political intersect that the promissory thrust embodied by such an intervention finds its most vital relevance and finality: to reassert the dream of a nomadic formation whose contract reflects its heterological collective makeup and communal agenda – a contract of autonomous self-governance founded on ontogenetic diversity (cyborgs coexisting with humans), equal gender and

[12] See Foucault on panoptical logic as "closed space" and as "general model" for the "capillary workings of power" (1975: 230ff.).

ethnic representation, cultural multiplicity, and libertarian sexuality and lifestyles (cf. Certeau, 1989: 119-67, 199-221).

In the light of the above comments, it is particularly relevant to return to the significance of "the real" as negative referent among the people of Zion,[13] exploring its conceptual function in relation to a heterogeneous nature reduced to the status of absent cause (cf. Wolfe, 1991): the fractal labyrinths of the depths beneath the surface of the earth; and the depleted, crumbling deserts of a planet plagued by chaotic weather patterns (*Matrix*). It is in the process of tracing its errand through subterranean bifurcating cavities that the multiethnic tribe has come to forge its marginal, revolutionary compact – aspiring to realize its collective destiny by liberating all forms of being from the factitious universe of virtual reason. Accordingly, in forgoing the surface, the multiethnic tribe has come to define itself paradoxically, identifying its geographic existence and its revolutionary ideal with a non-place: an interstitial, secret public topos; deterritorialized and rebuilt after each destructive assault conducted by the Matrix. It is therefore a matter of existential moment for Zion (as a multicultural entity and as the sole model for a democratic *polis*) to apprehend its public space in close relation to the uncharted expanses it has come to roam: a negative, indefinite, plural space – atopian (cf. Moncef, 2002: 139-53) in its shifting (non-)location (negative geopolitical identity); heterological in its cultural and ethnic makeup (indefinite inclusiveness); heterogeneous in its conception of the communal bond (plural political representation).[14] Like the concept of nature (and in the Wachowskis' trilogy it is, alas, nothing more than a concept), the polymorphous materiality of the real that Morpheus projects for Neo's contemplation is not only a negative horizon of unrepresentability, it is also a space indexing Zion's radical alienness,[15] and (by the same token) its absolute otherness as a genuinely plural alternative to the reductive topology

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[13] I am using the expression "negative referent" in relation to Adorno's theorization of "the heterogeneous" as the (asymbolic) "limit" and "remainder" that cannot be integrated within the realm of the "concept" (1973: 5).

[14] For a full elaboration of this paradox (a conception of community founded in the principle of heterogeneity), see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and the radical heterogeneity of the social (1990: 103 ff.). See also Appadurai (1993a, 1993b), Bhabha (1997), Guéhenno (1995: 15-104), Moncef (2003: 48-52) and Young (1990).

[15] See Adorno on the antisystemic function of alienness: "If a man looks upon thingness as radical evil... he tends to be hostile to otherness, to the alien thing... The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own" (1973: 191).

of the Matrix. The nomadic tribe is in this respect a shifting node of destabilization within the overall systemic and societal design of the Architect – an atopian (non-)space best described in terms of the Deleuzian conception of the "*Erewhon*" as a kernel of indeterminacy "from which, inexhaustible, the always new 'heres' and 'nows' emerge differently configured... I do, redo, and undo my concepts starting from a shifting horizon, from an always decentered center, from an always displaced periphery which displaces and differentiates them" (quoted in Prigogine & Stengers, 1986: 388; see also Deleuze & Guattari, 1980: 305, 307). (Conceived in Adornian terms, Zion's atopian space of communal self-rule is a node of "antagonism" positioned in counterhegemonic relation to the Matrix [cf. Adorno, 1973: 10 ff.].)

In the final analysis, however, and for all the persistence of Zion's counterhegemonic agency, the alternative *polis* remains residual in the most physical sense: a "leftover" defining itself primarily in negative terms, through its refusal to be integrated into the symbolic framework of the Architect (Lacan, 1966: 209-89; Lacan, 1971: 151-90). Even more discomfiting than Zion's recessive status is the circular trajectory of Neo's subjectivity – his transits from the cyber-mechanical womb of the Matrix to the "Wonderland" of the real (*Matrix*), and his final return to the Matrix via the Source, the cybernetic extension of the Architect's mind (*Revolutions*). In allowing us to apprehend the meaning of the trilogy's loop-like structure, this return of the One helps us to grasp the film's affirmation of the unavoidability of virtual reason in its full teleological (if not theological) ascendancy. In the scene that foreshadows Neo's entrance into a state of dormancy in the Source, we witness Zion's future liberator contemplating the giddy "mathematical sublim[ity]" of the Machine World (Deleuze, 1983: 79) shortly before he is "unplugged" from his "prison" (*Matrix*). And later, when he comes full circle and achieves one more historical cycle, the essential perfection of the Matrix's cybermachinic edifice is revealed to him in its full complexity: a network of "light" and energy vectors woven together with mathematical equations emanating from the Source (*Revolutions*). In short, what *Matrix* only hints at through Neo's awakening from his symbolic cave of simulacra[16] is fully articulated at the end of the trilogy into a grandiose vision of virtual reason literally at work, transcending the residual rubble and rabble of the real. "Everything that has a beginning has an end," the Oracle teaches us, not without a hefty measure of religious intrusiveness; and as far as the Wachowskis' hero is concerned, the teleological (and, dare we say, *theo*logical? [cf. Di Filippo, 2003: 78]) finality of all beginnings and ends is

[16] See Deleuze on the simulacrum in Platonism (1990: 256 ff.). See also Baudrillard (1984*:* 89-128; 1981: 9-68), Moncef (2004) and Watson (2003).

to return to the Source – an *Aufhebung* whose implications are far from unambiguous, as the last section of this essay will argue.

Above, I referred to the Matrix as a territorialized monad – a convergent structure articulated both on the logical-systemic level (the integration of difference into sameness) and on the political level (paranoid control and the repression of pluralism). Within this apparently total construction, the Rebels have crafted a logical and effective possibility of escape: the "rabbit holes" (*Matrix*) which operate as so many points of "descent"[17] into the real, leading to the lines of flight beyond the looking glass of simulacra with its abyssal spaces and its factitious modes of being and becoming. It would be useful in this context to consider the Matrix's architectonics of abyssal space, its infinitely seriated topoi (the dizzying corridors and screens of the Architect, for instance, or the maddeningly depthless landscapes and space traps of the Merovingian): what these complex topoi have in common is their strategic function as deceptive constructions – imbricate *trompes l'oeil* tactically designed to defeat any attempt at escape, infiltration, in-depth apprehension, or even simple visualization. In its runaway dynamic, its self-enclosure, and its coldness, such architectonics is deeply repellent. It is also inherently impoverished insofar as it is grounded not in polymorphism (material or symbolic), but rather in the *one-dimensional reduction* of the polymorphous real: reduction of cognitive depth through the calculus of cybernetics (Cypher's derealized steak [*Matrix*], the Merovingian's programmatic piece of cake [*Reloaded*]); reduction of the discrete to the modular (the cybercity's interchangeable people, buildings, and sites); reduction of the other to the formulaic simplification of virtual reason (the Merovingian's obscene exposure of the woman as a hollow structure of equations, "written"/programmed and graphically designed [*Reloaded*]). In sum, the apparent complexity of the Architect's mindscapes is, as Morpheus puts it, nothing more than the totalizing "prison"-house of logos triumphant and tyrannical – the logical, "ideational" double of the polymorphous "*mater*"/matter (cf. Kristeva, 1970 and 1980: 21-22) in which Zion has chosen to realize its vision of itself, projecting its destiny in the desert that stretches below the virtual exit points

[17] The Carrollian echoes of my argument, as well as those of the trilogy, are self-evident. What I am suggesting here is *The Matrix*'s reliance on what Deleuze defines as the art of "the [Carrollian] descent" in order to present the material world underlying the Matrix as a heterogeneous horizon of contingency and metamorphosis peopled with diverse nodes of singularity and morphogenetic diversity (Deleuze, 1990: 135 ff.). See also Di Filippo (2003: 98), Moncef (2002: 87ff.) and Motter (2003: 136).

and ushers the complex heterogeneity of the real (Goux, 1990b: 213-21). Again, it is important to keep in mind that in these contrasting experiences of space the structural tensions are not dialectical; rather, they center upon the *parallel coexistence* of two systems of thought and being that differ mostly in the degree of *dominance* that they attribute to the machinic and the virtual. After all, by existing in parallel relation to Zion's mother earth, the Matrix does live up to its name despite the obvious pun it carries: more than a matricial topology, it is also a maternal space – only a depthless and affectless one that generates "mathematical death" in runaway fashion, nullifying the morphogenetic heterogeneity of matter through the instrumental logic of machinism and the mathematical abstractions of virtual reason.

The idea of death through machinism and virtual reason is symbolized very early in the trilogy, when Neo finds himself stirring in the cold, metallic womb of his generatrix. As he grasps the demonic umbilical cord attached to his head and starts looking around him, it becomes apparent to us (as opposed to *him*) that the presymbolic limbo where he has lain in dormancy all his life is a designed replica of the biological womb. And when he looks around him and contemplates the staggering vistas of the Machine World, the crippling phenomenon of sublimity does not stem from Neo's encounter with the substance of a "thing" in the strictly psychoanalytic sense (see Lacan, 1966: 209-89; Žižek, 1989: 163ff., and 1991: 140ff.); in fact, what obtains in this scene is an abyssal effect akin to what Deleuze identifies as Kant's mathematical sublime. Contrary to the chaotic bifurcations of the subterranean depths navigated and inhabited by the deterritorialized tribe of Zion, everything in this matricial topology seems to subject the contemplative gaze to the reductive logic of one-dimensional geometry[18] and seriate replication – from the murky expanses of the Machine World to the gridded aspect of its vast series of modular cells to the terrifyingly flat and linear deployment of its webbed structure. As we delve into the trilogy, we discover that this motif of linearity and abyssal seriation is declined in various forms and expressions. Consider the breathtaking close-up shot on the telephone receiver, after Trinity is beamed to the Nebuchadnezzar (*Matrix*): what is revealed to us visually as well as metaphorically is the staggering efficiency of the agents' movement through the cybernetic grid of the city – a fluidity akin to the movement of pure form untrammeled by the

[18] Here I am thinking of Michel Serres's treatment of Euclidian geometry's grounding in a "mathematical method" that "reduces difference, the pluralism of others that overlap with the same" (1993: 162). See also Serres on the "homogeneity" and mathematical "abstract[ion]" of "geometric," or "deparasited," space (1982: 95-96, 178-80).

multidimensional density of space-time; this is indeed "time-space compression" radicalized, intensified, pushed to unfathomable extremes of ubiquity and communicational fluidity (Harvey, 1989: 308-23). We find similar variations on the one-dimensional condensation of spatio-temporal experience in the virtual-camera frames in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* – a glimpse into the perspectiveless series of the Matrix's code, taking us through the meandering symbolic space of the sequences as the eye of the camera hurtles down like an object falling through a black hole.

The trilogy's visual-spatial rendering of the serial logic and the one-dimensionality of the Matrix as system and as setting are evidently not devoid of ontological implications, most of which seem to point to the critical role of authenticity – cognitive, experiential, and existential authenticity. We come to apprehend the symptomatic opacity of these three levels even before we witness Neo struggling with real and existential nausea (*Matrix*; cf. McMahon, 2002: 170-172). Thus, as is obvious from the repulsive "rebirth" scene (in which we follow the One down the glutinous cavities that lead him to the concrete space of *mater*), there is decidedly no sense of an enlightening "cross[ing] of the fantasy" for Neo (Žižek, 1991: 140ff.); for even when Morpheus greets him with his resounding phrase, he is clearly not ready to *apprehend* any form of awakening-in-the-real that he can oppose to the inauthentic simulacra of a pre-Zion world. What *we* are left to apprehend in contemplating this scene is the possibility of a Neo-Platonic form of rebirth – one which is not, in the context of the Wachowskis' trilogy as a whole, free of philosophical ironies and contradictions. (I will come back to this in detail at the end of my essay.) Suffice it to say, at this point, that there are two problematic elements in the trilogy's idealist subtext: first, the kind of awakening that Neo goes through obviously does not mark his entry into a post-phenomenal sphere, but quite the contrary – for the world he awakens to is a sphere where the struggle to affirm and live out the polymorphism of phenomenality unmediated by Logos is indeed more desperate than ever; second, from his first stirrings on the Nebuchadnezzar to his final ascent, we have no consistent philosophical clues as to the nature of the field in which he seeks to express his "true," or "most authentic," existence – a field of open-ended nomadic becoming (Zion), a virtual field of immanence (the Source/the Matrix), or a field of transcendence (the realm of pure essence)?

At the intersection of the architectonic, the logical, and the ontological, there is another dramatic instance of spatial *mise en abyme* (cf. Jameson, 1994: 170ff.) in relation to the ambiguity of Neo's subject position: the scene during which Morpheus (in Socratic more than in psychoanalytic fashion [cf. Irwin, 2002]) confronts Neo with the contrast between the irreducible substance of a crumbling reality and the mind-crippling

complexity of a machinic system premised on the logic of linear gridding, runaway seriation, and simulation of the most intimate levels of cognitive (self-)experience (*Matrix*). The outcome of Neo's trial by virtual reality is, not surprisingly, deeply symptomatological in its raw immediacy – resulting in a particular form of existential nausea: loss of ontological grounding and an altogether novel recasting of the problem of authenticity (the question, "Is there any valid and fulfilling meaning to my self and my existence?" giving way to the question, "Are my self and my world real or virtual?" – and "Is there any limit between the two?"). This schizoid fading of self into world occurs in one form or another when Neo is booted into the Matrix and finds himself faced with the trials of infinitely seriated entrance points, labyrinthine spaces, phantasmagoric settings, and logical aporias. Unlike his initiation into the sublime meanderings of the new-found *mater* in the desert (a process through which he awakens to the magic of his body and to authentic love and commitment), Neo's unfolding through the topology of the Matrix is tantamount to a physical and psychic vanishing in which we witness the One deploying himself as a dehumanized mathematical-cybernetic entity – an instrumentally configured vector of virtual energy aptly figured in the cold and martial phallicity of his Rebel gear (as opposed to the sexy sensuality of his tribal garb). The "mathematical declination" of Neo as egoless body without organs reaches an intensely symptomatic point in his first confrontation with the Architect, a sequence during which the symbolism of cyberspace (the infinite series of virtual doors, the otherworldly iciness of the lighting, and the sheer unreality of the seamless building) climaxes in the hall-of-mirrors motif in the Architect's chamber. There, the One (talk about aporias!) finds his self not only reduced to a flat screen reflection, but also disseminated and eerily manipulated in a process of moment-to-moment interaction between the Neo in the room and the "kaleidoscopic subjectivity" (Kristeva, 1974: 317ff.) fashioned nanosecond by nanosecond through the agency of the computers (*Reloaded*). The broader epistemological and ontological implications of this incursion into the Source are momentous; for it is this first encounter between Zion's savior and the Architect that further validates the outcome of the second and with it the philosophical orientation of the entire trilogy. Indeed, well before he "chooses" to undergo post-phenomenal transubstantiation, superseding mortal visuality and rising above the desert of the real *and* the realm of simulacra (*Revolutions*), Neo is made to witness nothing less than the cancellation of the ego's unicity – a sort of death-by-fading that marks the vanishing of the self-founding Cartesian subject and its dearly conquered ground (the space of Reason). (In relation with this scene, it is also very important to add that the epistemological and ontological implications of Neo's vanishing have nothing to do with the

specular/phantasmic dissolution of psychoanalysis;[19] rather, the process at work in the chamber of the Architect inaugurates the subject's dissolution-by-televisual-dissemination, its differential, schizoid fading into an impersonal, interstitial (non-)space – the atopian horizon of onscreen inter-face and inter-activity [cf. Baudrillard, 1983; Haber, 2003; Kristeva, 1980b; and Moncef, 2002: 140ff.].)

This insubstantial world that Neo navigates is evidently a far cry from the desert of Zion, where the Rebels have established as their *raison d'être* not only an affirmation of the subject's unicity (in its teleological moorings, its existential grounding, and its actantial self-realization); they have also enshrined as a founding component of their communal covenant the autonomous will to set self-imposed *ethical limits* to the growth of their cybermachinic infrastructure. In this respect, the vital qualitative difference between Zion and the Architect's city-state does not reside in a (dialectical) clash of technological paradigms ("autonomous" vs. "heteronomous" technology [cf. Castoriadis, 1987: 109ff.; Dupuy, 2002: 11-57; and Moncef, 2002: 128ff.]); instead, the defining divergence revolves around a fundamental difference in dealing with the *reach* of the empire of *technē* – the *intensification* of its means and methods to the point of catastrophic "counterproductivity" (Dupuy, 2002; Illich, 1976). Indeed, while the citizens of Zion are socially and strategically dependent on machines and simulation technology, they have not surrendered their decisional, existential, and (above all) ethical sovereignty to the ruthless rule of *Zweckrationalität*. In the cybercity, by contrast, the latter rule is pushed to such staggering extremes that it results in radical "alienation" through "heteronomy" (Castoriadis 1987: 115 and *passim*) – leading, in turn, to the twin phenomena which give the cybercity its particularly suffocating death-in-life "aura:" reification and "*Entzauberung*" (Weber, 1995). On the intersubjective level, the triumph of instrumentality in the Architect's urban construct is figured through an entropic "culture" (cf. Adorno & Horkheimer, 1982: 120-167; Jameson, 1979) of detachment and affectlessness (Jameson, 1984) – an anomic as well as anemic sense of decadence symbolized by the paleness and metallic makeup of the faces, the cold textures and the cutting angularity of clothes, the manipulative seduction games, and the derealized relationships (including the impossibility of experiencing the full depth of a "real kiss" [*Reloaded*]). And, as if to emphasize the decadent futurism of the Matrix's hip scene, the Architect's reconstruction of "the world as we used to know it" presents us with a panorama of disintegration, *déclassement*, and material decay, as if the

[19] See Lacan (1966: 89-97, 1971: 178ff.). As we will see, the fading in question is only one phase in the transformations of Neo's subjectivity from machine to simulacrum to mathematical being.

only way for us to derive any "nostalgic" vision from the film is to behold the already-pastness of our present – contemplating its loss as it were in the rearview mirror of a racing car, darkly.[20] This overarching atmosphere of gutted pastness and disenchanted futurity stands in stark opposition to the Sartrean spirit of passionate *engagement* that prevails among the members of the nomadic tribe. And on the levels of lifestyles and libidinal economy, the "passions" of Zion transpire with particular power through the Dionysian echoes of the party and the sexually charged cavernous space in which it takes place: the organic, flesh-toned "dance hall" and the romanticized love caves branching out from it – all of it rendered in the warm shades of burnished images. In short, Zion's bacchanal spirit of the cavernous depths suggests a scene of primal and unmediated *jouissance* – an implicit but dramatic counterbalance to the symbolics of displacement and fetishism that prevail in the nightlife scene of the cybercity.

In the political sphere, the implications of machinism and virtual reason triumphant are even more disquieting. The panoptical mapping of the social is dominant in its hyper-capillarity, since the technological tools deployed by the various control agencies and power nodes of the Matrix have now allowed the logic and reality of surveillance to infiltrate the largest levels of public life as the well as the most intimate recesses of the private domain. In telling Neo that the agents are everyone and no one (*Matrix*), Morpheus is not only exposing the potential for each matricial subject to identify with power, its hegemony over bodies and psyches, and its effective manifestation at any point and at any moment; he is also warning him about the purely intersubjective nature of power, its differential dissemination throughout the cybercity in a topology that has surpassed the traditional model of centralized totalitarian power – power with a human face, so to speak. In the Matrix, the truly dystopian character of power originates in the fact that everyone has come to internalize its "naturalness" and panoptical ubiquity in an impersonal fashion – not through any conscious acts of demagogic commitment to "the system;" accordingly, and by virtue of this passive endorsement, it is the citizens themselves who participate in the *elision* of the fact of power relations. In a more general sense, this traceless exercise of power in the cybercity implies the death of the social contract and the concept of the public sphere itself. Contrary to the politics of representation and participation enshrined in Zion's tribal covenant, what obtains in the Matrix's pervasive power gridding is a total liquefaction of the *res publica*, resulting in the annihilation of the social bond, no less. (In fact,

[20] As in *Dark City* and *Bladerunner*, this esthetic of nostalgia is the opposite of the idealizing mood that Jameson analyzes in his essay on postmodern art and consumer society (1983: 116-18).

aside from the virtual omnipresence of the police apparatus and Smith's brief references to the legal apparatuses [*Matrix*], one finds it difficult to recognize in the nameless, Hobbesian construct any of the attributes associated with an ordinary city-state.) The absence of an identifiable social contract (or even the very sense of sociality) is indeed so radical that it is difficult to define the Architect's urban structure as a dictatorship, since there is no functionally recognizable *center* of power – only the intransitive power exerted by the agents when necessary. The Architect's conception and application of power is therefore not only hypercapillary in its pervasiveness, it is also self-effacing in its dissemination through the networks, in its achievement of a purely impersonal and intersubjective dynamic (cf. Lefort, 1978: 215-237). The political outcome of this hyperreality of power (the death of both the contractual form and the public-private dichotomy) is the collective equivalent of what happens to Neo on a subjective level when he faces the Architect for the first time: the intensification of power by fading – its sublimation into a "non-place," an "interstitial" *vector* of collective control (Foucault, 1977: 150-51).[21] As for the ideological consequence of such a sublimation (*méconnaissance* pushed to the point of political blindness), it is eloquently formulated by Morpheus as he guides the One through his first acquaintance with the Architect's handiwork: the "world" as Neo "knew" it is not just a construct of false representations; more importantly, it is a screen of ideological illusions "that has been pulled over [his] eyes" in a strategically orchestrated yet invisible process of manipulation (*Matrix*) – a process whose obscene underpinnings will become completely manifest to him in the deadening chamber of the Architect (*Reloaded*).

Although the subversive thrust of Neo's awakening proves indubitably productive through most of the trilogy, the apparently cathartic culmination of it (a soon-to-be mathematical being striking a deal with a higher mathematical being) leaves us with the burden of many unsettled and unsettling questions. Even if our empathy with Zion's destiny allows us to breathe a little less uneasily at the outcome of the deal,[22] we still find it

[21] Claude Lefort describes the genesis of a similar "disappearance" of the subject ("the other-as-fellow") in the crisis of the contemporary social contract (1988: 177ff.).

[22] The much-discussed idea that the entity speaking to Neo in the Machine World is "God" seems particularly difficult to endorse, since the being in question literally rises from the machines and is not different from them in any way except its apparent hierarchical status (*Revolutions*). It is also worth recalling that when Neo and Trinity infiltrate the Machine World, they do it in a craft and not by means of virtual presence. If there was any traditional "God" manifested in the trilogy, it would have most likely not emerged from among the machines (after all, a reasonably credible

difficult to come to philosophical terms with the very nature of Neo's ontological becoming: is the One ultimately a cyborg who has "risen" above his ontogenetic and existential moorings, becoming posthuman and postmachinic – entering a cyberpantheon of "pure" mathematical and energetic essences? Is his essentialist "choice" a definitive confirmation of the triumph of virtual reason? And, in the final analysis, how essentialist *is* Neo's choice? As for the principle of the real, what has become of it in the end? If the last moments in Neo's "phenomenal life" are any indication, the trilogy appears to be at best ambiguous as to the viability of material reality – its potential for survival if not its very legitimacy as a parallel mode of being. Indeed, despite its providential victory, Zion comes to embody a tragically endangered *mater*, residual and marginal in the most concrete sense; literally running for its hide in a last-ditch struggle to preserve whatever wet- and hardware the architects of the virtual world are willing to concede to the community, which remains the only "human" outpost in the posthuman hell of machinism and false reality.

Earlier in this essay, I referred to the possibility of Neo-Platonic resonances in the rebirth and self-realization of Zion's savior. Upon questioning Neo's last moments onscreen, however, it turns out that the trilogy presents us with an opaque *semblance* of Platonic rise to the realm of essence. Notwithstanding the epic echoes in the final "ascent" scene, one cannot help but wonder whether Neo's access to the mathematical splendors and complexities of the Matrix mark any truly *Aufhebung*-like (in)sight beyond the world of the Architect to a redeeming, aggrandizing (in short, *transcendent*) realm. For in the end, Neo's accession to the universe of pure light is, as it were, philosophically anti-climactic despite all appearances – anti-climactic simply inasmuch as it is not articulated on a plane higher than the Matrix, not even a plane unfolding within Neo's own consciousness and setting him apart from the Architect's "design" and machinations. Despite the brilliant and promising Hegelian ruse used by the Wachowskis' hero, his "transcendence" is philosophically and existentially contradictory to the point of *naïveté* (or perhaps subtle ironic provocation?). The contradiction (and such is my working assumption here) lies in the fact that Neo rises beyond his cyborg status… only to rejoin a computer mainframe! In other words, through a seeming gesture of self-affirming transcendence, he appears to supersede the phenomenal realm (material blindness = essential [in]sight)

God *is* expected to occupy a qualitatively *and* physically transcendent position – wherever that is). Moreover, such a God would have been *either* interventionist from the outset (balancing things long before cataclysmic double bind) *or* not at all. Last, and most important, it would have certainly not needed Neo to help deal with things Matricial.

only to let his consciousness merge into the field of immanence generated by the Architect's computer network.

There is something both fertile and disturbing about the vacuum-packaged quality of Neo's unsurpassable bondage – something that leads us to envision the vicissitudes of the subject in *The Matrix* not in terms of dialectical "elevation" (idealism), and certainly not in terms of the heuristic progression announced by the Oracle (self-knowledge) (*Matrix*; *Revolutions*); rather, what we are led to is a reassessment of subjectivity in light of a cyclical saga of recursive deaths and rebirths always climaxing in mathematical sublimation: death of the (thinking) subject of Universal Reason uprooted from its self-founded ground (the *ego cogitans*); death of the (specular) subject of psychoanalysis by televisual depthlessness and affectlessness (the *ego mirans*); and finally, death of the (fluid) subject of inter-facial and inter-active becoming (the *ego errans*). The (mathematical) sum of what is "left over" – this "radical" residue of subjectivity – is perhaps best rendered by the subtle linkage between the metaphor of Neo's blindness-as-mathematical-insight and the *leitmotif* of the virtual camera plunging mindlessly from the luminescent edges of the code into its dark depths: what both figural elements index in their own way is a desertification of subject, sight, and insight to the point of nonbeing – the ecstatic dissolution of self within a field of total mathematical immanence with no horizon of existence beyond the world of disincarnate, asignifying code (cf. Goux, 1978: 122ff.; 1990: 168-195). Neo-Platonic transubstantiation? Nirvanesque detachment? (cf. Brannigan, 2002). Considering the final philosophical stance of the trilogy, such questionings become vexingly irrelevant insofar as they end up floundering against the "zero-sum" collapsing of immanence and transcendence at the end of the Wachowskis' mesmerizing opus: if the One "rises" above the realm of visibility to integrate a mathematical field of immanence, how far (away) *has* he risen? Beyond the remarkable will to free volition embodied in the final fight and in the redeeming act that breaks with the repetitive "historical" cycles of the Matrix (*Revolutions*), the elevation of the Wachowskis' hero seems to be a most paradoxical conclusion to the saga of an ego on its way from dormant cyborg to mathematical entity. In returning their hero to the Source, the creators of the trilogy have indeed put him in an embarrassingly contradictory (not to mention unheroic) philosophical and existential position; for all his will to reduce the post-historical torpor through which Zion was doomed to witness its "history" repeated over and over, Neo finds himself incapable of enacting the ultimate gesture of redemptive free will: including his synthetic-self-to-be[23] in the

[23] The possibility that Neo has become "half evil" after having assimilated Smith is not a relevant counterargument here, since the One – now that he has definitively

deal and superseding his own cyclical status as "mechanical repetition of the form" (Tarkovsky, 2000).

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neutralized Smith's "negative" – has actually become a balancing, synthetic agency. It is this final metamorphosis that explains the fondness and hopeful tone of the Oracle's closing words (*Revolutions*).

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THE POSTHUMAN SUBJECT IN *THE MATRIX*[*]

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Abstract

This essay tests the hypothesis that "posthumanism" today constitutes the most radical questioning of the "subject." It does so by putting posthumanist theories and concepts by proponents like Alain Badiou, Jean Baudrillard, N. Katherine Hayles and others to the test in a juxtaposing reading of *The Matrix*. The essay argues that cultural criticism today has to reconnect popular posthumanist scenarios in what could be called "science-fiction-theory" with earlier forms of materialist and poststructuralist critique.

Are We Being Posthuman Yet?

These are hard times for cultural studies, cultural theory and cultural criticism. The "theory wars," believed to be won a long time ago, have flared up again and are currently being waged under new conditions and with a mixture of old and new weapons. Many calls for some renewal or revision of theory can be heard from all corners in the "new humanities" (Derrida, in Cohen, 2001). In the current "post-theoretical" condition these calls for "new theory"[1] usually occur in connection with what seems to become the next theoretical move: "posthumanism." Something is happening, an event of possibly "humanitarian" scale, which creates the urgent need to think about and address the current "posting" of humanity, the human and humanism as an apparent inevitability. Clearly the possibility of an evolution that might overrun the human – especially in a scenario where humans might contribute

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[*] An earlier and shorter version of this essay was first published in *Polygraph* 17 (2005).

[1] See for example the special issue of *Angelaki*, 4: 2 (1999) edited by John Armitage, "Machinic Modulations – New Cultural Theory and Technopolitics," in which Armitage argues for a "new theory" as "recombinant cultural theory of technology" (1-2).

to the installation of their own technological successor species by blindly succumbing to the cultural and economic dynamic of techno-scientific capitalism[2] – is by now no longer pure science fiction. Its reality, in many domains, including the moral debate about genetic engineering, issues of global terrorism, environmental sustainability, star wars programmes, extraplanetary threats, etc., seems now so pressing that, from all sides, demands for legislation regulating the human technology-induced apocalypse can be registered.[3] This apocalyptism, however, is only the flipside of the euphoric spectrum of discourses celebrating the posthuman condition of "man" as a new form of colonial project: pushing our bodily and mental limits to the edge of virtuality and cyberspace.[4] Any critical posthumanism therefore inevitably has to tackle the current desire for posthuman ontology and epistemology from the position that posthuman desires usually wish to obliterate: the posthuman body and the posthuman subject. In this respect, however, the post-1968 generation of thinkers, including virtually all the "forefathers" and "mothers" of cultural theory (as practiced in the Anglo-

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[2] For a recent essayistic analysis of this scenario see Truong (2001): "Plaise ou non au fondé de pouvoir présomptif, pendant l'humanité, l'évolution continue [whether the asssumed authorised representative likes it or not, during humanity evolution continues – unless otherwise stated all translations are mine, SH]" (12). It is this next evolutionary step, facilitated by technologies which leads to an eventual separation between mind and body (20), a cyborgisation (see e.g. Donna Haraway's work) and a posthuman horizon of an "immense espérance *totalement inhumaine* [an immense *and entirely inhuman* hope]" (26), which Truong laconically calls "le Successeur."

[3] See e.g. the discussion it started by Fukuyama (2002). Bryan Appleyard (2002), in his review of Fukuyama, pointed out that the "science" argument invalidates Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis because as long as there is techno-scientific "progress" liberal democracy seems far from being a historical inevitability.

[4] Compare for example one of many "transhumanist" declarations available in the most posthuman of places, the internet, which states: "We foresee the feasibility of redesigning the human condition… We seek personal growth beyond our current biological limitations… Transhumanism advocates the well-being of all sentience (whether in artificial intellects, humans, non-human animals, or possible extraterrestrial species) and encompasses many principles of secular humanims…" (www.transhumanism.com.declaration.html). Against both this utopian transhumanism and any reactionary humanist essentialism, Michel Serres, recently restated in an interview that "le virtuel est la chair même de l'homme. Une vache, elle, n'est pas dans le virtuel [the virtual is the very flesh of man. A cow, however is not in the virtual]" (2002: 16). Serres, being a philosopher of science, sees a future in a "new kind of humanism" and in the fact that science has become a streamlike "grand narrative" accessible to all. It is unclear, to me at least, however, how his position will avoid even the most naïve forms of technological determinism.

American academic context today), will rightly ask, what is so new about all this? "Man" had been declared dead as early as 1966 by Michel Foucault (famously, in *Les Mots et les choses*), and before him there were Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, who all in their way are already posthumanist thinkers, of course. While Foucault's turn against "man" led to a renewed interest in the body and modern technologies of the self, many contemporary posthumanists seem all too eager to leave the body, the self and the subject behind.

Jacques Derrida's early essay "The Ends of Man" (1982: 109-136), following Heidegger, against Sartre, demonstrates the inevitably metaphysical (onto-theological) nature of all humanism, and explains the "double-bind" of the "end/ends" (i.e. teleology *and* finality) and already hints at the possibility of the posthumanist, no-longer-anthropocentric humanities-to-come:

> What is difficult to think today is an end of man which would not be organized by a dialectics of truth and negativity, an end of man which would not be a teleology in the first person plural. (Derrida, 1982: 121)

It is also no secret that the Derridean notion of writing and *différance* already inscribe humanity's technological "other" into its (unsurpassable) metaphysical notion of the "subject" (see Derrida, 1979: 335).

From a post-68-theory point of view there must be an eerieness about contemporary talk about the posthuman. Something like a moment of *déjà vu* which requires a return to that recognition when "man" still seemed possible in his finality, as Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe pointed out in their introduction to *Les Fins de l'homme – à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida* (1981: 13): "l'onto-théologie du Sujet se voit basculer dans une analytique de la finitude [the onto-theology of the Subject is tipping over into an analytics of finitude]." It seems that the analyses of and attitudes towards the situation characterised by what is experienced as an irruption of the posthuman event are multiple. But in fact they have barely changed since the first waves of anti-humanism swept France, the lost origin of theory. Already in 1979, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe described the state of the humanities and the question of man thus:

> Entre une "disparition de l'homme" aujourd'hui trop bien connue pour ne pas être mal connue, une critique générale de l'humanisme trop bien reçue pour ne pas être, à son tour, digne de questions, et les humanismes honteux, naïfs ou réactifs, sur lesquels se rabattent malgré tout, faute de mieux ou par dépit, tant de discours, il se pourrait bien que la question de "l'homme" demande à être, aujourd'hui, posée à nouveau frais – aussi bien philosophiques que littéraires,

> éthiques ou politiques –, et qu'elle demande à l'être comme une question de la fin. (1981: 20)
>
> [Between a "disappearance of man," too well known not to be ignored, a general critique of humanism too well received not to be questioned in turn, and the shameful, naïve or reactive humanisms on which, despite everything, for lack of a better alternative or simply in spite of everything, so many discourses fall back, it might well be possible that the question of "man" demands today to be asked under new conditions – as much philosophical as literary, ethical or political – and it does so as a question of the end.]

From a theoretical standpoint, very little indeed has changed in the past twenty-five years. The questions outlined have been preoccupying cultural theory ever since and, if anything, a lot of theory that describes itself as either "new" or "post" or "posthumanist" constitutes a forgetting, repression or even regression in thinking. It seems that a lot of posthumanist theory has forgotten the dimension of destination that *Les Fins de l'homme*, following Derrida and the whole "project" of deconstruction, posed as a question. Most posthumanist approaches simply seem to have returned to the question about the "essence" of man: "qu'est-ce que l'homme?" Yet Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe and many others already declared in 1979/80 that the real question, or the question of the humanist real, opening up a possibility for challenging humanist anthropocentrism, is "qui est l'homme?" Theory's task vis-à-vis (post)humanism must therefore still be to evaluate the state of this question, and the state of the forgetting of this question, as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe stressed:

> Cette question [qui est l'homme ? La question de Hoelderlin], l'époque précisément l'a oubliée. L'époque, c'est-à-dire la domination totale (y compris dans la pratique) de l'anthropologie, poursuivant l'exploitation aveugle et affairée du "Qu'est-ce que l'homme?," qui est l'extrême avancée, on commence à le savoir, de l'âge de la technique. Car l'anthropologie sait toujours à l'avance ce qu'il en est au fond de l'homme… et c'est au nom de cette identification préalable qu'elle aboutit à l'extrême désidentification ou, pour mieux dire, à la défiguration générale (voire à la limite générique) de l'homme. (1981: 21)
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> [It is exactly this question [who is man? Hölderlin's question], that this epoch has forgotten. The epoch, that is to say, the total domination (included in practice) of anthropology, pursuing the blind and busy exploitation of the "What is man?," which, as we begin to understand, is the most extreme advance of the age of technics. Because anthropology always knows in advance what is the matter with man… and it is in the name of this preliminary identification that it achieves the extreme disidentification or, to be more precise, the general defiguration (or the generic limit) of man.]

In analogy with a question asked by Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (in Docherty, 1993) in relation to feminism: why is it that at the moment when subjugated minorities strive for recognition through attaining subject status, "theory" – always a mixed blessing – comes along and takes away the "subject" from, for instance, feminist activism and "decenters" it; it seems equally curious why, precisely at the moment when the question about the "ends of man" becomes relevant on a global scale, that is, when there is for the first time thanks to the technologies of virtualisation and communication the possibility of a political and ethical experience of "humanity," posthumanity arrives? This seems to be the question that a theoretically informed cultural criticism has to ask the posthuman: have "we" ever been human (enough)?

In terms of Bruno Latour's thesis, "We have never been modern," this would mean that posthumanism confronts the separation of the two movements of "purification" (i.e. the ongoing questioning of "what does it mean to be human?") and "hybridization" (i.e. the ongoing cyborgisation of human and non-human/technology). In order to retain a critical stance these two movements need to be thought anew in a "nonmodern" (i.e. neither modern nor postmodern, or neither humanist nor posthumanist) way (Latour, 1991: 10-11): "a nonmodern is anyone who takes simultaneously into account the moderns' Constitution and the populations of hybrids that that Constitution rejects and allows to proliferate" (47).

This postulates indeed a very similar task for thinking, or theory, to the one advocated by Jean-François Lyotard in "Rewriting Modernity" (1991). Lyotard explains the ambiguity of the "re-" in "rewriting" as "a return to the starting point, to a beginning that is supposed to be exempt from any prejudice because it is imagined that prejudices result solely from the stocking up and tradition of judgments that were previously held to be true without having reconsidered them…" (26), and secondly: "the 're' in no way signifies a return to the beginning but rather what Freud called a 'working through', *Durcharbeitung*, i.e. a working attached to a thought of what is constitutively hidden from us in the event and the meaning of the event, hidden not merely by past prejudice, but also by those dimensions of the future marked by the pro-ject, the pro-grammed, pro-spectives, and even by the pro-position and the pro-posal to psychoanalyze" (26).

Theory, vis-à-vis posthumanism would therefore have to be at once a perlaboration of the traumatic event (i.e. how we became posthuman) which is itself the (re)writing of (the truth) of this event – this seems a project that appears close to Alain Badiou's work (see below) – and a new beginning, the beginning of something new, the embracing of the radically other – which sounds closer to a Derridean trajectory. Keeping these two movements – or

these two "lines of flight" (Deleuze) – in mind, theory must raise anew the question of the (posthuman) subject.

The question: "Who comes after the subject?," however, also seems somewhat belated, ever since it was so powerfully asked, again by Jean-Luc Nancy, in 1986 (in Cadava, *Who comes after the Subject?,* 1991). This event also marks a turning point in the thinking of the subject, a kind of "post-subjectivity" of which Alain Badiou's work may be the clearest example, and which understands the "end of the humanist, metaphysical subject" as the arrival of "the some *one*, of the singular existent that the subject announces, promises, and at the same time conceals" (4), as the beginning of the "singular" one "less present to *itself* than present *to* a history, an event, a community, an oeuvre, or another 'subject'" (5). Badiou's essay, "On a Finally Objectless Subject", figures prominently among these reclaimings of an evenemental concept of the subject and its truth.

There seems therefore a real danger in seeing posthumanism as the next step for cultural theory if this would mean a forgetting of the body, on the one hand, and the subject, on the other. At the same time, there is of course also a continued need for a serious rethinking of the subject of and in theory. The moment of recognition, the arrival of the subject, is also in many ways the beginning of theory. What would it mean to see this return to the subject as a kind of apotheosis – as a dissolution into a finally "subjectless" theory (in the form of all too human, all too idealist and uncritical versions of posthumanism)? Can the posthuman be recaptured by theory, appropriated as a return of the subject, as a project or process?[5]

This corresponds to Neil Badmington's claim that the turn from anti-humanism to posthumanism is regrettably (but also interestingly) dominated by a focus on technoculture (2001: 18). One could say that the very often simplistic technological determinism at work in a lot of posthumanist readings is undertheorised in the sense of a forgetting of the complexity of humanism itself on the one hand, and theory's work of the critique of the "liberal humanist subject" on the other. Instead Badmington argues convincingly that (maybe in addition to the truly innovative work by some posthumanist critics) posthumanism can also be read, in deconstructive terms, as humanism's structural other: the (repressed and fetishised) "inhuman" which has been haunting its categories from its very conception. Theory's relation to posthumanism thus becomes similar to Lyotard's attitude towards the postmodern, as a rewriting of modernity/humanism by claiming

[5] This seems to be the idea behind some of the more critically aware posthumanist work (see for example Bukatman, 1993; Hayles, 1999, and Rutsky, 1999, among others).

that "we" have always already been postmodern, or posthuman (cf. also Badmington, 2000 and 2001).

Many posthumanisms forget that by either renouncing or simply reinscribing subjectivity into the posthuman condition they are turning a blind eye to the very ambiguity of the subject's subjectivization, the paradox of the liberal humanist subject *par excellence*. Historically, a major motivation behind the practice called "theory" is precisely located around this ideological fix (made accessible by Althusser, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault and Derrida). The idea that individual agency in terms of freedom and choice could be safely located within a self-identical subject as point of origin for the production of meaning is at once untenable *and* the default position of everything anthropological, and hence the *telos* and project of the traditional humanities. As an attack on humanist common sense theory has always been posthumanist without ever succumbing to the idealist illusion of being able to transcend humanism completely. It is the strange combination of empiricism, idealism and realism which constitutes theory's main target, "liberal humanism," according to Catherine Belsey:

> [C]ommon sense urges that "man" is the origin and source of meaning, of action and of history (*humanism*). Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience (*empiricism*), and this experience is interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual (*idealism*). These propositions… constitute the basis of a practice of reading which assumes… that literature [and arguably all "texts"] reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who expresses it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognize it as true [cf. the importance of "realism"]. (Belsey, 1980: 7)

This liberal humanist common sense is far from being dead, and it can still be seen to dominate the public sphere, regardless of how posthuman we may or may not have become, which makes the return to an unreflected humanism at the slightest hint of a crisis more than likely.[6]

Given the problem of the "unsurpassability" of the (human) subject (of theory) it is not surprising that theory has become ever more speculative and thus has encroached upon the territory of speculative fiction.[7] This is closely

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[6] For a good summary of this argument in the context of theory's relation to literature and cultural studies see Patrick Fuery and Nick Mansfield (1997, chapter 1).

[7] As Hayles points out: "The literary texts often reveal, as scientific work cannot, the complex cultural, social, and representational issues tied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovations" (1999: 24); and (247): "questions about the posthuman

related to the importance of psychoanalysis for theory, on the one hand (see for example Mannoni, 1979), and postmodern temporalities on the other. What postmodern and psychoanalytic theory and speculative fiction share is this strange temporality of the "future anterior," the future (im)perfect, the traumatic attitude to the present, of always coming after the event, after the other, etc. Theory, the thinking of the event and of the (postmodern) subject have thus a strong affinity to contemporary science fiction which, in turn, is an important source of representations of the posthuman within contemporary cultural imaginaries. The theorist who has been exploring precisely this problematic nexus is, of course, Jean Baudrillard. While Alain Badiou may be criticised for his somewhat optimistic demand for an "objectless" subject, Baudrillard seems to please himself in the "psychotic" theory-fiction of a "subjectless" object. Theory for Baudrillard is "paroxystic" – it takes place "just before the end," i.e. with the end firmly in sight, and is joyfully nihilistic about it.[8] Knowing that without "fatal strategy" the end will never arrive, Baudrillard's is a kind of inverted ascesis that would like to think from the position of the "inhuman."[9] The only true radical thought possible in the

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become increasingly urgent. Nowhere are these questions explored more passionately than in contemporary speculative fiction."

[8] Cf. Jean Baudrillard's "I am a nihilist" (1994: 160).

[9] Cf. Baudrillard (1997: 50-51): "Il faut prendre son parti de l'inhumain, d'une forme inhumaine que nous ne voulons plus du tout accepter ni reconnaître aujourd'hui – faute de quoi nous tombons dans une déshumanisation totale, par effacement de cette relation nécessaire entre l'humain et l'inhumain… La pensée de l'humain ne peut venir que d'ailleurs et non pas de lui-même. L'inhumain est son seul témoignage. Lorsque l'humain veut définir, en excluant l'inhumain précisément, il tombe dans le dérisoire. [One has to embrace one's part of the inhuman, of an inhuman form that we today no longer want to accept nor recognize – without which we fall into total dehumanisation, because of the obliteration of this necessary relation between human and inhuman… Human thought can only arrive from elsewhere and not from the human itself. The inhuman is its only testimony. As soon as the human wants to define by excluding the inhuman it falls prey to ridicule.]" This means that ultimately, Baudrillard is not that far off from a return to humanism proper. His posthumanism seems far less radical than the kind advocated by many techno-culturalists: "La pensée doit jouer un rôle catastrophique, être elle-même un élément de catastrophe, de provocation, dans le monde qui veut absolument tout épurer, exterminer la mort, la négativité. Mais elle doit en même temps demeurer humaniste, soucieuse de l'humain, et pour cela retrouver la réversibilité du bien et du mal, de l'humain et de l'inhumain. [Thought needs to play a catastrophic role, it needs itself to become an element of catastrophe, of provocation, in a world which absolutely wishes to purify everything, exterminate death, negativity. But at the same time it has to remain humanist,

current state of hyperreality and exhaustion is a form of theoretical "terrorism":

> Accentuer la fausse transparence du monde pour y semer une confusion terroriste, les germes ou les virus d'une illusion radicale, c'est-à-dire d'une désillusion radicale du réel. Pensée virale, délétère, corruptrice du sens, complice d'une perception érotique du trouble de la réalité. (Baudrillard, 2001: 26)[10]
>
> [To accentuate the false transparency of the world in order to create a terrorist confusion in it, seeds or viruses of a radical illusion, that is to say a radical disillusion of the real. Viral thinking, pernicious, corrupting meaning, accomplice to an erotic perception of reality trouble.]

Thinking itself becomes "demonic" and a "murder weapon" [*l'arme du crime*] (1997b: 66-67). Baudrillard's version of post-theory, paroxystic theory in the state of "hypertelie" (of what goes further than its own end [1994: 161), or "fatal theory" working towards a "principle of evil," the only theory that would still have consequences, is a theory that no longer desires its own object,[11] but rather takes its starting point from the object and explores the subject's "seduction" by the object: "Ce qui dans l'object est irréductible au sujet [what, in the object, is irreducible to the subject]" (1997b: 181). Since the object signifies the "real world" (including that of the subject) which, at the same time is effaced by the sign, the object world develops an "uncanny strangeness" (2000: 16), so much so that "[n]ous sommes dans un monde aléatoire, un monde où il n'y a plus un sujet et un objet répartis harmonieusement dans le registre du savoir [we are in a random world, a world in which there is no longer a subject and an object, harmoniously distributed within established knowledge]" (2000: 59). In a virtualised world, therefore, it is the "subjectless" object which becomes the source of seduction:

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concerned with the human, and therefore it has to rediscover the reversibility of good and evil, of human and inhuman]" (2000: 107).

[10] See also "Theoretical violence not truth is the only resource left to us" (Baudrillard, 1994: 163), which sets him in clear opposition to Badiou (see below). Cf. also Baudrillard (1981: 129) for the necessarily parodic nature of theory as "fatal strategy."

[11] Similar to science, (cf. Baudrillard, 1981 : 19): "De toute façon, l'évolution logique d'une science est de s'éloigner toujours d'avantage de son object, jusqu'à se passer de lui: son autonomie n'en est que plus fantastique, elle atteint à sa forme pure. [In any case the logical evolution of a science is to distance itself further and further from its object, until doing away with it altogether. Its autonomy only becomes more fantastic, it achieves its purest form.]"

> La virtualité ne se rapproche du bonheur que parce qu'elle retire subrepticement toute référence aux choses. Elle vous donne tout, mais subtilement, elle vous dérobe tout en même temps. Le sujet y est parfaitement réalisé, il devient automatiquement objet, et c'est la panique [virtuality only moves closer to happiness because it surreptitiously withdraws any reference from things. It gives you everything, at the same time it takes everything away. The subject is perfectly achieved in it, and automatically becomes object, and everybody panics]" (Baudrillard, 1997: 203).[12]

Seduction, for Baudrillard, is "fatal" and thus coincides with the workings of (posthuman) theory:

> It is the effect of a sovereign object which re-creates within us the original disturbance and seeks to surprise us. Fatality in turn is seductive, like the discovery of an unknown rule of the game… What is left then but to pass over to the side of the object, to its affected and eccentric effects, to its fatal effects (fatality is merely the absolute freedom of effects)? Semiorrhage. (1993: 360-61).

What is thus at stake in revisiting theory in the light of posthumanism is the construction of a cultural criticism understood as a continuation of the critique of the subject, its ethical and political importance carried over into posthuman times.

Science-Fiction-Theory

The return to theory through an engagement with the posthuman subject will here be attempted by sending theory to the movies, i.e. by reading some core posthumanist theoretical texts and the ways in which they find a point of articulation in recent mainstream science fiction cinema, and in the *Matrix* films in particular. One of theory's fundamental assumptions is that change – be it political or cultural – can and probably must occur through critical subjects performing critical and theoretically informed readings. Alain Badiou's notion of the subject of truth is an interesting attempt to revive the idea of subjectivity after the postmodern focus on the subject's decentring. Badiou's subject, however, constitutes a very particular focus on truth as an event for a subject in a singular but concrete situation which nevertheless is not fixed but remains to be fulfilled. In a sense, this notion of the subject-as-

[12] See also Baudrillard (1993: 366): "The subject's power derives from a promise of fulfillment, whereas the realm of the object is characterized by what is fulfilled, and for that reason it is a realm we cannot escape."

event, in psychoanalytic terms, is very close to being "traumatic," on the one hand, while on the other it is certainly not unrelated – despite Badiou's refreshing but also in many ways exaggerated polemic against all forms of ethics which involve notions of a radical "other" (Badiou, 2001) – to an ethico-political thinking that sees the event as dis-propriation of the subject from its (imaginary) identity and therefore sees identity as untenable ground for any (political) decision without the acknowledgement of the irreducible precedence of a radical otherness.

My reading of *The Matrix* through Badiou, Derrida and a few others will try to show that a reconciliation between a political philosophy of the truthfulness of the event and an ethics of alterity can be productive for the kind of cultural criticism whose special strength has always been "the critique of the subject, and in the area of textual studies, the analysis of texts as offering a position to the subject" (Easthope, 1988: xii). The aim is to introduce a Derridean, fictional "as if" (*comme si*) into the process of sending Badiou's subject through *The Matrix*; and the idea is that a reading of *The Matrix* – and possibly other mainstream science fiction texts and maybe even much of "popular culture" – informed by a thinking of the event along Badiou's lines can produce critical insights at once into Badiou's work, theory and culture and the sum of culture's signifying practices.

Science fiction film is of course a very specific form of fiction (a very specific form of an "as if") or of the visualisation of what remains to-come, that is what is thinkable, envisageable. The borderline between "science" and "fiction" (or between fact and fabrication) has of course never been as fixed and clear-cut as (liberal humanist) "common sense" might wish to believe. Both science and fiction have lost their sense of what would constitute their respective essences some time ago: scientificity and fictionality (or maybe "literariness") therefore need to be distinguished differently. In order to establish a specificity – and this, as a task, is absolutely necessary – a "radically" constructivist approach seems the only way forward. Only by establishing distinctions between fiction and science will it become possible to evaluate the hybridity and specificity of the genre of science fiction and what is happening to it, and what is partly happening thanks to it. It is only this view which allows an insight into science and fiction and their historically specific self-legitimating discourses (how they have defined their objects and thus developed their subject positions); the history of their respective influence on the cultural imaginary and our epistemological horizon: what they respectively have constituted as thinkable/representable (with science fiction [SF] causing a fusion of objects and of horizons in this context which leads to a reconceptualisation of both science and fiction); the history of their respective ideological work, their ways of positioning their

subject-addressees and their subjects-supposed-to-know and their relation to their objects. A perspective that looks at science, fiction and SF under these three conditions no longer emphasises either of these traditional sources of knowledge production. It would therefore no longer strictly speaking follow a humanist logic. Instead it would ask the question of the human anew in the form of a radicalised critique of the subject/object paradigm. This is precisely what many posthumanist readings of SF hail, namely the arrival of a "new" (post)subjectivity in the fictionality of virtual reality (VR).

In terms of the posthumanist critique of the subject transposed onto the problematic of science, fiction and SF this means that behind the question of how science is related to fiction and fiction to science is already the anxiety: what if those boundaries do not hold? What if the distinction breaks down? What if it never existed in the first place? What if there is something bigger behind the constitutive discursive practices which escapes all of them – science, fiction and SF – but which at the same time has allowed them to develop separately from each other?

Despite all talk about posthumanism there remains, however, something profoundly "humanist" about the genre of the science fiction film. What makes SF at once so enjoyable, fascinating and somehow frustrating, disappointing to watch, is the promise of the posthuman: fascinating because it constitutes the very idea of freedom – the essence of man to project "himself" into the future, the promise of liberation, self-redemption, self-realisation, self-transcendence etc. – disappointing because it inevitably returns us to the human, and in many cases even to the "all-too-human." It promises an altogether other logic and cannot help but return to and reconfirm "the human condition." In the age of global techno-scientific capitalism it seems obvious that science fiction should be one of the major if not the most important playing fields of our cultural imaginary. The part of the gatekeeper of what is imaginable and unimaginable in techno-scientific societies is necessarily played by technology. Technology plays the role of "*deus ex machina*" – good or evil, god or demiurge, utopian or dystopian – but even in its affirmation it is still, inevitably, anthropomorphic. Increasingly, in recent science fiction films, virtualisation and cyborgisation are called upon to challenge and confirm traditional limits of the human. In that sense SF is "monstrous" – the usual terror involved in (con)fusing the possible with the actual, the virtual and the real, the fiction and truth.[13]

[13] There is no doubt that the ways in which we will read film, and dystopian science fiction in particular, have changed after the "invention" of "global terrorism" and the ongoing and possibly interminable "war on terror." One cannot fail to be struck by the irony or the "belatedness" of the plane crashes into the World Trade Center, and the globally broadcast television pictures of this "perfectly orchestrated" inferno. The

SF narrates stories about the transformation of subjectivity. It transposes these stories into an other place (*u-topos*) and an other time, which means it is concerned with a presence that always differs from itself and is already always deferred. It thus repeats and hence activates the original trauma of identity; hence the persistence of its nostalgic closures, its self-protective returns to transformed/transfigured/purified versions of humanity. What is at stake in the particular economy of SF is the reappropriation and renewed repression of the non-existent essence of "man." A posthumanist reading of SF, in earnest, must therefore be a deconstructive reading of these moments of negation – negation of the otherness that shows in the inhuman, the non-human, the trans-human – and it must instead affirm their dangerous "monstrosity."

Is this continual transformation of subjectivity – dissolution, displacement and re-subjugation or "coagulation" of subject positions – in SF the expression of a desire for a "finally objectless subject" (Badiou, 1991; the desire for a Nietzschean "overman") or rather the fantasy of a "finally subjectless object" (a world thoroughly cleansed of anything human; the *Terminator* scenario)? SF constitutes a mode of awareness that hesitates between the "belief that certain ideas and images of scientific-technological transformations of the world can be *entertained*" and "the rational recognition that they may be *realized*," and, on the other hand, "the belief in the immanent possibility… of those transformations" and the "reflection about their possible ethical, social, and spiritual interpretations" (Csicsery-

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global "trauma" that paralysed most of the world for the three weeks after 11 September 2001 until the airstrikes against Afghanistan started is one that finds its origin in the fact that all looked so "familiar." Most people who have seen one or several Hollywood disaster movies will have wondered who had written the script for bringing down the twin towers. Who can deny this eerie feeling that the "Eventness" of this specific event had already taken place so many times? Who can deny that the boundaries between fiction and reality have fundamentally shifted since this day? We know these pictures to be true – it happened, but what exactly? – nevertheless, their shockingness lies not in their reality. The terror does not (at least not predominantly) lie in the physical threat terrorism poses, it lies in its virtual fatality or the fatality of its virtuality. We are unable to dissociate fiction from science, illusion from reality, the media from their acts of representation while being conscious of the fact that the very essence of our human condition relies on this nostalgic realism, however critical. The dilemma seems to be constituting the very "skin" of our eyes. But it is also the sign of a profound crisis of the human, of humanity as an organizing concept of global culture and of humanism as the foundation of our aesthetic, moral and political legitimation of our actions. This is what "global terror" stands for today. This is the abyss into which we stare, the current horizon of the sublime – filled as always with terror and desire.

Ronay, Jr., 1991: 387). SF seems caught in the middle of a politics of science – the possible, the inevitable, and an ethics of truth, following Badiou – the advent of a subject to a truth-process necessary for the writing of the situation that "saves" the event. The posthuman character of this event and its subject of truth depicted in science fiction constitutes a new reality:

> SF… is not a genre of literary [filmic] entertainment only, but a mode of awareness, a complex hesitation about the relationship between imaginary conceptions and historical reality unfolding into the future [similar to Todorov's conception of the fantastic]. SF orients itself within a conception of history that holds that science and technology actively participate in the creation of reality, and thus "implant" human uncertainty into the nonhuman world. (Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 1991: 388)

It seems therefore that the event of science at once eliminates the nonhuman and at the same time helps incorporating it into the very essence of human truth. Science is thus that "fictional" event (of an "as if") that constitutes the posthuman truth and what Baudrillard names our "hyperreal" condition, namely the "derealising" of human space.

What happens when "philosophy [or theory] goes to the movies" is, as Christopher Falzon argues, that since films "represent a kind of collective visual memory, a vast repository of images" (2002: 3), and since philosophy must follow Plato in attempting to "grasp the true nature of reality" (4), film seems to be a privileged ground for thinking through the idea of Plato's cave. Cinema can at once illuminate fundamental questions of thought and representation, metaphoricity and experience and, on the other hand, is very much a part of this experience itself. Asking philosophical questions about cinematic reality and truth may therefore "contribute to the cinematic experience" (15) as much as "going to the movies" may in fact change, as the reading of *The Matrix* provided below will try to demonstrate, the very question about truth and reality.

In many ways, *The Matrix* is a philosophical film: it asks old philosophical questions and emplots philosophical scenarios. In doing so it also poses ethico-political questions:

> The premise of this film is that most of humanity has been enslaved by a race of intelligent machines who use human bodies as power sources. They are however completely unaware of their real situation. Everything seems normal because a supercomputer feeds them a simulated reality ("the Matrix"). Only a few rebels have managed to escape this enslavement and are able to offer resistance to the machines. Thus at the outset of the film, before he escapes from the Matrix, everything that the central character Neo (Keanu Reeves)

> experiences and takes to be real is in fact a computer-generated illusion. (Falzon, 2002: 27)

The Matrix programme is a simulation of 1999 late capitalist (American) city life which hides a "reality" located around 2199.[14] Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its machines have devised "sentient programmes" called "Agents" who patrol within the Matrix simulation and eradicate any doubts as to the reality of the virtual lives of its subject: only the hacker "Neo" (Keanu Reeves) senses that something is wrong with his existence, even before he is contacted and physically extracted from the VR of the Matrix by the group of cyber-rebels following Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) who live on a kind of hovercraft (The Nebuchadnezzar) in the sewers of a destroyed megapolis. The only real human refuge left, deep inside the Earth, protected from the nuclear winter caused by humanity itself, in the attempt to turn off the solar power supply for the machines by simply "obscuring" the sun, is Zion. The rebel's cause, helped by the freed Neo, is to protect Zion while liberating as many fellow humans as possible from their virtual bonds. Morpheus is convinced that Neo is the messiah-like ONE for whom enslaved humanity has been waiting. His education programme – his preparation for taking on the Matrix with its fearsome and rather attractively cynical Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) – involves a gradual subversion through reinsertion into the Matrix (via the "jack" in his skull) and terminates in his "apotheotic" "becoming" (part of) the Matrix, at the end of the first part of the trilogy.

Falzon uses *The Matrix* to illustrate the problem of Descartes' evil demon: Morpheus asks Neo whether he has ever had a dream that he was so sure was real that he would not be able to wake from that dream nor know the difference between dream world and real world. The "evil demon" – here played by the machines and their policing agents – involves "both a malevolent, all-powerful agency working behind the scenes, and the possibility of our being completely, systematically deceived by this agency" (Falzon, 2002: 30). *The Matrix* can thus be seen as a philosophical film and in a sense the film of philosophy as quest for the truth about reality (Plato's cave, Descartes' evil demon and Baudrillard's "evil demon of images" or simulacrum constitute one underlying dynamic of *The Matrix*, while Marxism, (Christian) messianism and Greek mythology represent another).

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[14] The Matrix – a by now classic SF idea – is a simulation programme which, following Baudrillard, is more real than reality. It hides the "desert of the real," the post-apocalyptic and postmodern truth, namely that the worst has (always already) happened, that the truth is void, that there is no truth (cf. Gibson, 1993; Hayles, 1999: 11; and Rutsky, 1999: Introduction).

More precisely, however, *The Matrix* is a film about the "event" (of truth and the inevitable change truth effects on reality). One could say that what Badiou, science fiction film, theory and posthumanism share is a certain irreducibly utopian thinking – a messianism with or without messiah (cf. Derrida, 1994a and 1994b), and a certain pre-occupation with the "*comme si*" and the performative. Fiction represents a reality of the "as if," speculative theory about the event (either as "traumatic" or "fatal"), however, do so too. In this sense, both areas share a recognition that the virtual is always at the heart of human reality, or as Derrida would say, an "as if" is always possible. It is always possible to assume an "as if," whose "performative force" in fact creates the event by pre-empting it. Derrida claims that it is with the history of the "as ifs" – in their undecidable performative and constative aspects – that the "humanities-to-come" will have to engage (2001c: 72). Theory has to deconstruct the performativity and constativity of the "as if" whose dominant discourse occurs through fiction. This is why fiction or literature, including science fiction, of course, must be the main source and target for a theory that wants to question the event by imagining the possibilities of its arrival. The question is: can anything arrive from (science) fiction's "as if," or from posthumanist forms of "virtuality"?[15] What "arrivant" lies beyond the virtual? This is the question asked by *The Matrix*, and many other "post-representational" science fiction films – i.e. films whose posthumanism propels them towards imagining a future where cinematic representation even of the most virtual and technologically sophisticated forms threatens to break down.[16] While keeping in mind the usually consolidating and conservative turn given to science fiction scenarios at their points of resolution (temporary closures), science fiction can undoubtedly inform the thinking of the event (the "as if") and the subject in terms of their inventiveness with regard to an imaginary "other" space through which cultural change may arrive, as long as the distinction between the performative and the constative remains

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[15] Cf. Derrida's notion of "invention de l'autre" (1987; reiterated in 2001c: 74-75), where he refers to: "cette pensée du possible impossible, d'un possible-impossible qui ne se laisse plus determiner par l'interprétation métaphysique de la possibilité ou de la virtualité [this thinking of the possible impossible, of a possible-impossible which can no longer be determined by the metaphysical interpretation of possibility or virtuality]."

[16] See for example Tom Cohen's reading of *Terminator* 2 as a fight against "the invasion, from a fantasized 'future,' of an anti-representational and post-humanist logic" (1994 260). What is at stake in posthumanism in general is the survival of representational logic. The question is whether the zero/one digital logic is still "metaphysical" (death being the "absence of information"). How would one symbolize the absence of information on a screen?

meaningful. But what if, as Derrida asks, the belief that an event usually "takes place" by breaking through the order of the "as if," and what if therefore the place of the real is no longer sufficient to displace the logic of fictionality? What if "le lieu lui-même devient virtuel, affranchi de son enracinement territorial… et quand il devient assujetti à la modalité d'un 'comme si'? [the place itself becomes virtual, cleared of its territorial roots… and when it is subjected to the modality of an 'as if'?]" (2001c: 32-33)?[17] In that context, the only event possible must arrive through fiction. Derrida therefore, logically, pushes the "as if" to its extreme by positing that "only the impossible can (truly) arrive":

> No surprise, thus no event in the strong sense… the pure singular eventness of *what* arrives or of *who* arrives and arrives *to me* (which is what I call the *arrivant*), it would suppose an *irruption* that punctures the horizon, *interrupting* any performative organization, any convention, or any context that can be dominated by a conventionality. Which is to say that this event takes place only to the extent where it does not allow itself to be domesticated by any "as if," or at least by any "as if" that can already be read, decoded or articulated *as such*… It is often said that the performative produces the event of which it speaks. One must also realize that, inversely, where there is a performative, of its power of the "I can ," "I may," it does not arrive, it does not happen, in the full sense of the word. (2001a : 53-54).

A reading of science fiction is thus concerned with posthumanism's "impossible," its unthought and its "real" – where the logic of the "as if" must break down and something altogether other *will have* arrived. This future anterior regulates the question of the "event" as it has been thought in theory. Badiou, Derrida and Baudrillard all play with this "apocalyptic" logic of how to speak so that the event can arrive: or, one could say, how to break out of "the Matrix" – whether it be interpreted as "metaphysics," "capitalism" or "hyperreality." The only hope of establishing a meaningful link with truth and reality lies in renouncing any link in exchange for a mere possibility of

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[17] *The Matrix* partakes in the whole logic of the virtualisation of (the end of) work that Derrida (2001c) discusses, by providing a particularly bleak prospect for "telework," virtual community and communication for a humanity "blissfully ignorant" of its own enslavement – a "disembodiment" of work hailed by some utopians, but in fact merely constituting a new phase in capitalist exploitation and alienation (2001c: 51-64 in particular). "[D]ans notre nouvelle logistique d'interaction homme-machine, il ne s'agit plus de travail. L'homme et la machine sont en interface. Il n'y a plus de sujet du travail. [In our new logistics of man-machine interaction there is no longer a question of work. Man and machine form an interface. There is no longer a subject of work.]" (Baudrillard, 1997b: 41-42)

the truthful event (as if it were possible). The only subject thinkable is this "Thing," this "entity," the "void" which establishes a link by cutting itself off ("*dé-liaison*"), by subtracting it(s)self.

Dire l'événement, est-ce possible?[18] Only as its impossible-possibility. In accepting the pertinence of this question we are allowed to project Badiou's specific problematic of "being and event" and their relation onto fiction and in particular science fiction. Cultural critcism's task in this specific context would then become a reading of the event and its impossible-possibility as articulated through the as if of fiction. We can thus follow Badiou's own practice in relation to Beckett whose work he reads in terms of the eventfulness of fiction – a kind of reading "for" the event. Badiou accepts Lacan's definition of fiction as that which "presents itself as the structure of truth." Fiction, therefore, rightly has a privileged place in Badiou's and also Derrida's work because fiction is fiction about the eventness of the event, not because it is concerned about reality, or the border between fiction and reality but with the (Lacanian) real, or the truth of a specific situation and in particular its unthought and unthinkable remainder, or, as I would like to contend with Badiou, its other. It is no wonder that the "place" of fiction should be so closely related to democracy in Derrida and to politics in Badiou, since for both in a sense, fiction is that kind of discourse which is the most "democratic" in that it is called upon to say "anything," in the sense that its very structure regulates the possibility of saying something at all. Both Derrida and Badiou seem therefore to share to some extent at least the idea of the event as incomplete inscription process, with on the one hand a traumatic truth-to-come, as a kind of Kantian regulative idea, and on the other a singularity and situationist specificity of a truth-for-a-subject that provides a possibility for an *ad hoc* and unpremeditated "*lien social*" – or what Badiou calls "(la) politique" (Badiou, 1985: 12-13, 18) – in its very structure of general "*déliaison*."[19]

The Matrix *as Posthuman Event*

What is the nature of the event in *The Matrix*? There are in fact two main events, occurring in the two central scenes, which together have the structure of an anastrophe and catastrophe in this cosmic drama. The first event would

[18] A question Derrida addressed in Montreal in 1997, "Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement" (in Soussana & Nouss, 2001).

[19] For the aporetic "déliaison" within the "lien social" see Derrida (1998). For Derrida's notions of "democracy-to-come" and its relation to "literature" see Derrida (1992 and 1987) and Spinks (2001).

probably not fulfill Badiou's criteria – it is Neo's moment of recognition, realising the true extent of human oppression by the machines. The second, the properly apocalyptic or catastrophic moment and "event of truth," is Neo's "becoming posthuman," his definitive entry and embodiment inside the cyberspace of the Matrix. It is possible to read Neo's "resurrection" and "second coming" as event in the context of current posthumanist thinking, i.e. as an event that creates the situation out of which the posthuman subject must derive its fidelity to the event as a truth-process. The question theory may put to the text of science fiction is: in what sense is the posthuman an event? What happens to its subject? What happens to its body? What is its truth? And what is its real?

But first a brief return to the first scene, which is a fairly standard occurrence of recognition. It is an induced event in which Morpheus, the gatekeeper of reality and figure of benign paternal authority, proposes a choice to Neo, whom he takes to be the One, i.e. the future saviour of true and free humanity: the blue pill of forgetting, of acceptance of continued enslavement in hyperreality, or the red pill of recognition, resistance and truth. Greek mythology, Christian messianism and marxist notions of ideology are all at play in this moment of recognition; Plato's cave, faith and knowledge, and subjectivation coincide here. The red pill initiates a tracing process necessary to find out the exact location of Neo's repressed and inaccessible "real," his body, his true location or indeed his place of truth. The scene of Neo's virtual death and rebirth into "real" reality is a kind of inverted mirror stage. He is literally liquefied and turned inside out, and "melts" into his own mirror reflection. In a form of psychotic self-annihilation he "merges" with the other. The next thing we realise is the apocalyptic scenario of mankind's true inhuman condition. The world that the *Terminator* films had merely anticipated as projection has already been and gone, the apocalypse has already taken place without fully arriving. Humanity has lost its battle against its successor, the machines, and is now, in turn, being exploited as a provider of natural and environmentally friendly human battery cells. In a later scene Morpheus holds up a battery to Neo which looks distinctly like a "Duracell" – some things evidently last longer than others (which is similar to the endurance of other brands in SF like Coca Cola in *Blade Runner* for example, which poses questions about the unsurpassability of capitalism in the SF genre). As a result of Neo's "awakening," his now conscious body has become useless to the machines and is flushed out of its cocoon and recuperated by Morpheus's group of cyberrebels, who greet him with the ominous words: "welcome to the real world" (and who will later introduce him to Baudrillard's "desert of the real").

The event structure of this scene of course has nothing to do with the significance given to the term in either Badiou's or Derrida's thought. A simple Althusserian reading of the subject's interpellation, misrecognition and ideology's necessary overdetermination seem to be able to cover the meaning of this scene. Nevertheless it is an event that is based on a decision, not by a "free" subject, but rather a decision of the ideological Other. It is a decision which clearly changes the subject's place in the imaginary and symbolic order and displaces his real, even though it merely exchanges one master signifier for another. For Neo, it is an *Er-eignis*, a Heideggerian "enowning," through which a change if not in true subjectivity, then at least in identity takes place. It is a moment when the self rebuilds itself through an appropriation of its own "other," a moment of "secretion" in which the otherness of this other is "ejected" and made "obscene." Neo's former "virtual" existence in the Matrix now becomes the new "real" (unimaginable, unspeakable) of his real life among the rebels. The electronic sound sequence heard during the liquid mirror scene just as the mercury-like liquid engulfs Neo's "interior" (a scene which seems almost like the negative of the final moments of the T 2000 model in *Terminator* 2) indicate the "expiring" of this (digital) ghost in the machine which was Neo's virtual existence. Virtuality, from now on, is what structures Neo's desire, the void of his truth. In this sense Neo (re)becomes similar to the proto-posthuman living in and out of cyberspace, celebrated by so many posthumanist texts. Ironically, it is only now that Neo's situation resembles our own, facing an uncertain future of "posthumanity," the impossible-possibility of a real encounter with death in virtuality. Only the previous recognition of his virtual condition as loss, however, can allow him to experience the reality of his desire. Now although there is nothing that may be objectively called "truth" in all this – all this happens in a piece of SF that anticipates a dystopian future 200 years from now. Hence, for us viewers, the moment before Neo's recognition is just as real or unreal as the moment after. Even so, the basic logic of identity formation holds, whether fictional or not. This exactly is the peculiarity of the fictional "as if." The question, however, is whether this logic should be resisted. Should it rather be ignored?

The second scene could be read "as if" it fulfilled the criteria of Badiou's notion for an event. It is an event without decision, something absolutely unforeseen happens: an apotheosis. Neo's physical death is reversed, he becomes the "One," the Subject to truth who determines the situation by changing the Matrix. Let us call this event "becoming posthuman" as envisaged by SF. Badiou's event is connected to a political subject. What makes it appropriate to claim the place of a subject for Neo is his very function as messiah, as the One. Badiou himself uses the resurrection

of Christ as narrated by Paul as an event and advent of a subject to truth. Neo's subjectivity, his specific and singular future anterior (his future "im/perfect") lies in determining the universal truth out of the multiplicity that may constitute his being in the posthuman situation. The subjectivity of Neo is that which he will become as the result of the event and his fidelity to it. The event is that which acts as a supplement to Neo's being and forces him towards a "truth process" that remains truthful to the event-supplement. In that sense, Neo's subjectivity (re)creates the event, which is ultimately depending on faith. Outside the subjectivity, the event does not exist. Neo's subjectivity depends, as the Oracle in the film explains, on his own belief. The event is also that which makes the world, i.e. the Matrix meaningful for the subject and thus open to change and militant action. The structured but multiple character of the new situation, which I want to call "posthuman," is the result of the (unnameable) event as that which calls for truth and the universal. We could argue that the knowledge of the Matrix's existence for Neo unfolds a "state of situation" which is interrupted by his becoming posthuman, by that which exceeds his being, his not or no-longer being which is not death. This event seems to develop *ex nihilo*. The event is therefore the "truth" of the situation, its previous void or real which leads to a complete restructuring of the Matrix – the Matrix or the system turned against itself just like Neo was "turned inside-out" before. What has been defining Neo as subject is his fidelity to the event. Although, strictly speaking, Neo-subject comes after the event, and is a result of it, the truth process demands a trauma-like reinscription of its traces within the situation, very similar to what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the traumatic logic of the symptom, which again shows the affinity between science fiction, posthumanism, (psychoanalytic) theory and the event:

> From where does the repressed return?… From the future. Symptoms [just like events?] are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively – the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning. As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier's network. Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way. (Žižek, 1989: 55-56)

The subject, however, cannot completely appropriate truth because it exceeds him or her in its irreducible multiplicity and eventfulness. The truth-event's

repositioning makes it possible for the subject to perceive the former "blind spot" of the real, in Neo's case his being neither virtual nor physical but "inbetween," the "spectrality" of metaphysical being as such.[20] This traumatic notion of subjectivity as truth process in Badiou might again be related to Žižek's Lacanian reading:

> This, therefore, is the basic paradox we are aiming at: the subject is confronted with a scene from the past [an event that has always already occurred] that he wants to change, to meddle with, to intervene in; he takes a journey into the past, intervenes in the scene, and it is not that he "cannot change anything" – quite the contrary, only through his intervention does the scene from the past become what it always was: his intervention was from the beginning comprised, included. The initial "illusion" of the subject consists in simply forgetting to include in the scene his own act… (1989: 57-58)

The posthuman event is therefore not a revelation as such but an act of interpreting intervention. As Slavoj Žižek claims: "Event is the traumatic encounter with the Real… while its denomination is its inscription into language… In Lacanese, Event is object a, while denomination is the new signifier that establishes … for Badiou, the new readability of the situation on the basis of Decision" (1998: 242). Badiou's subject, like Althusser's and Lacan's, is therefore never outside ideology but is always ideological and hence political rather than ethical. Neo's Christ-like "transubstantiation" and "apotheosis" could thus serve as a sign of the immortality and universality that the subject has access to through his or her fidelity to the event.

Badiou's subject is the "wager" of a subject without an object, pure subjectivity that does not constitute itself on the back of an object. Badiou's starting point here is the claim that "the form of the object cannot in any way sustain the enterprise of truth" (Badiou, 1991: 24-25), only a subject can. Badiou therefore wants to "de-objectify the space of the subject" (25) and his version of the post- or even trans-humanist subject is "the very same subject dissociated or subtracted from reflexive jurisdiction, un-constituting, untied from all supports unrelated to the process of truth" (25). Does not cyberspace promise precisely this "locality" for a finally objectless subject?

On the other hand, cyberspace is of course part of the ongoing delocalisation or dislocation of the subject which contradicts Badiou's notion of truth for a subject; he calls a subject "the local or finite status of a truth. A subject is what is *locally born out*" (25). Truth always precedes this local subject in the sense that "the subject is woven out of a truth, it is what exists

[20] Compare Derrida's work on "hauntology" and spectrality in *Specters of Marx* (1994).

of truth in limited fragments" (25). Truth arrives through the subject, it passes through it. Truth, following Lacan, is "making a hole in knowledge" (25). The subject therefore is a (pre-ontological) "void"[21] that constitutes the "very gap filled in by the gesture of subjectivization" (Žižek, 1998: 257). Badiou's "axioms" for a truth-event-subject complex are the following: a truth is "post-eventual" (a process that works its way backward from a naming of the event as a void, in our case, that would be the moment "we" became "posthuman"); the process of a truth is fidelity to this event (Neo's posthuman subjectivity lies in his (future) fidelity towards the name and the event of his "becoming the Matrix"); the name of the event is connected to the "terms of the situation" which nevertheless ultimately remains "infinite" and can never be fully present (Neo's spectrality seems structurally necessary as symbolic of a new and posthuman cybersubjectivity); as long as the knowledge of a situation does not exceed its "infinity," that is as long as the situation is "open" and accepted in its irreducible multiplicity there will have been truth (as long as the posthuman remains untotalisable as event, fidelity to its truth remains possible and "universal"). Neo remains a (posthuman) subject as long as his substance remains multiple or undecidable, as long as he resists the transcendental position of totalised "experience" as presence, as long he remains the "generic" subject of a truth process, as long as he is not seen as either the result or origin but rather as "in excess" of the posthuman situation, or as long as Neo remains a "faithful connection operator" between truth and the event as name. Neo's "transsubstantiation," his becoming (part of) the Matrix could be described, following Badiou, as his "sujectivisation" (Badiou, 1991: 27): "the emergence of an operator that is consecutive to the interventional naming that decides the event."

It does not seem irrelevant that Neo's advent/subjectivization is in fact first triggered by the treason of a "false" operator, Cypher, who plays the Judas part in the story. Symbolically one could say that it is the treachery of the void or the number, the digit, that nearly spoils the posthuman event, or at least wrongly names it. Badiou, however, would resist the looming metaphysical closure involving truth, knowledge and subject here by positing that truth must remain unknowable to its subject. Neo, as posthuman subject, is a "local moment of the truth" which necessarily transcends his finality in

[21] As Žižek remarks in his critique of Badiou's combination of psychoanalysis and "post-marxism" in relation to (Oedipus's) "inhuman excess" in the human: "Don't these lines expose the elementary matrix of subjectivity: you become 'something' (you are accounted a subject) only after going through the zero-point, after being deprived of all those 'pathological' (in the Kantian sense of empirical, contingent) features that support your identity, thus being reduced to 'nothing' – 'a Nothingness counted as Something,' which is the most concise formula for *subject*" (1998: 256).

being infinite: "every truth transcends the subject precisely because its whole being consists in supporting the effectuation of that truth" (30). However, this subject is "confident" through belief (which takes the form of "event-knowledge") and the generation of "namings" that only have referents in the "future anterior."[22]

This naming process again forms the possible nexus between Badiou's thought, Christianity, science fiction and posthumanist utopia: such names, Badiou asserts, "will have been assigned referents or meanings when the situation will have come to be in which the indiscernible, which is only represented (included), is finally presented, as a truth of the former situation." Would it thus be possible to argue that Neo's posthuman "adventure" presents the truth of his former recognition, of his void and the annihilation of his virtuality? Does the posthuman name a truth that will have been? That the apocalypse has already taken place? That the human never existed?

This was my starting point for this essay, in relation to (post)theory. Could it now be said that the truth of the posthuman will have been in naming the "radically human" and that we thus have to ask: have we ever been human (enough)? Again Badiou would probably want to resist closure here by claiming: "It is entirely impossible to anticipate or to represent a truth, as it comes to be only in the course of evaluations or connections that are incalculable, their succession being solely ruled by encounters with the terms of the situation" (1991: 31). But can we really have it both ways: a situation determining a truth which unfolds out of random encounters? The "objectless" subject as either the "real" of a situation or as a mere "hypothesis": "a subject is … at once the *real* of the procedure … and that which uses names to make hypotheses about truth" (32)?

This is where I would like to return once more to the scene of the posthuman "event" in *The Matrix* and reintroduce again the questions of politics and ethics: is not Neo's (fictional "as if") posthumanity also an invention of the other, an encounter with a "significant" other? It is, after all, through the encounter with agent Smith, the "sentient programme" that polices the Matrix, that is with "agency" as such, that Neo's posthumanity comes into being as excess of the Matrix, and therefore as its "truth"? It is not so much an encounter with agent Smith as imaginary other, as "other-than-*me*" (i.e. not his bodily similarity, his virtual humanity) but rather as "other-than-other" (agent Smith's unknown ontology: who or what is "he"? His post-subjectivity? His true "void" and undecidability of being neither human,

[22] The sequels to *The Matrix* in this respect constitute the emergence of those referents. The general disappointment with *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* may be due to a lack of truthfulness to the original event, or, put differently, the Subject Neo turns out to be not *à la hauteur* of the Event.

a body, nor a machine but pure anti-representation, similar to T 2000, inhabiting any "human" form) which needs to be appropriated by Neo in order to make truth in terms of political resistance arrive. It is clear from the start that it is not their difference that separates Neo and Agent Smith, it is their uncanny resemblance, their uncanny and ironic sameness which accounts for much of the viewer's fascination with Smith. In this context it is important to listen to what agent Smith has to say about humanity:

> Have you ever stood and stared at it [the Matrix], Morpheus? Marveled at its beauty. Its genius. Billons of people just living out their lives… oblivious… Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost… Some believed we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery… The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was redesigned to this: the peak of your civilization… I say "your civilization" because as soon as we start thinking for you, it really becomes our civilization, which is, of course, what this is all about… Evolution, Morpheus. Evolution… Like the dinosaur. Look out that window. You had your time… The future is our world, Morpheus. The future is our time… I'd like to share a revelation that I've had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species. I've realized that you are not actually mammals… Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment. But you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed and the only way you can survive is to spread to another area… There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus… Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague. And we are… the cure.

The "real" of the posthuman out of which Neo's "emancipatory politics" could evolve, the "impossible" of the situation is humanity's lack of being (in-the-world). But what if the posthuman was just a perpetuation of this original "lack"? A renewed obliteration of the trace or the truth that long before the distinction between the human and the "inhuman" (the non-human, trans-human and post-human) the "mark" of distinction already existed in a kind of (Derridean) arch-virtuality more virtual and more real than any cyberspace, any space at all, virtual or real? What if the Matrix (as a kind of Baudrillardian object-world of seduction) always "preceded" the (post)human, and every event, every twist and turn of the subject (human or posthuman) has already been marked, written, codified following an

absolutely irretrievable "origin" which is the birth of "humanity," representation and space as such?[23] Would Badiou's (ethics of) truth be able to recognise this? Can one say, in the face of Badiou's imperative, "Keep going! (*Continuez*)" that he derives from Beckett's (absurdist) existentialism,[24] as that which Badiou's ethics calls out to the subject: as long as we stay away from the three forms of evil, as long as we do not betray the event of the posthuman, as long as we do not confuse it with its simulacrum, as long as we do not succumb to the terror of its absolutisation (by, like Morpheus, obsessively giving names to everything that arrives [cf. his insistent "He's the One"], which Badiou identifies as the "proper" sense of religion)? Is there such a thing as "localised" posthumanity if it is true that there cannot be humanity unless through "rooted particular truths" (Hallward, in Badiou, 2001: xiv)?

More Virtual than the Virtual

In a sense, Badiou's "objectless" subject, as Peter Hallward points out (2000: 15a), seems diametrically opposed to Baudrillard's thought, for whom, it would seem, posthuman hyperreality instead is characterized by a disappearance of the subject, and the threat of an "object without subject." Both are "options" that are being taken up within current posthumanist thinking, and indeed are at work within the logic of *The Matrix*.

For Baudrillard, the actual "evil" of hyperreality resides in the fact that the apocalypse can no longer happen: "L'avènement du virtuel lui-même est notre apocalypse, et il nous prive de l'événement réel de l'apocalypse. Telle est notre situation paradoxale, mais il faut aller jusqu'au bout du paraodxe [the coming of the virtual itself is our apocalypse, and it deprives us of the real event of the apocalypse. This is our paradoxical situation, but one has to follow the paradox right to the end]" (1997b : 43). Posthumanist theory (a theory that takes its starting point from the "inhuman") therefore needs to "anticipate" the end (45), which is why theory and the theorist as "paroxyst" situates him or herself in the moment just before the end, "au moment avant dernier, juste avant la fin, just avant qu'il n'y ai plus rien à dire [at the

[23] It would doubtless be possible to trace the idea of a "Matrix" reality back to ancient forms of mysticism in all cultures of "writing" like for example the Arabic notion of "mektoub" or similar Jewish notions that are present in many "Jewish" thinkers, including Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida.

[24] Rather than to Beckett, however, the "absurd heroism" that worries Simon Critchley (2000) in his review of Badiou's *Ethics*, the "continuez" seems to be closer to Albert Camus' Sysiphean figure.

moment one before last, just before the end, just before there is nothing more to say]." The main character in *The Matrix*, Neo, could be interpreted as just one such Baudrillardian "paroxyst." For Baudrillard, the virtual is the characteristic hysteria of our time: "the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real" which leads to the production of "hyperspace" (VR or cyberspace being the "desert of the real itself"): "the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere." *The Matrix* represents this "réalité virtuelle, celle qui serait parfaitement homogénéisée, numérisée, 'opérationnalisée', [qui] se substitue à l'autre parce qu'elle est parfaite, controllable et non contradictoire [virtual reality, that which would be perfectly homogenized, digitalised, made 'operational,' [which] replaces the other because it is perfect, controllable and non-contradictory]" (Baudrillard, 2000: 52).[25] The virtual is thus the "horizon of the real" in which a subject is no longer necessary (2000: 52-53): "Dans le virtuel, il n'est plus question de valeur, il est simplement question de mise en information, de mise en calcul, d'une computation généralisée où les effets de réel disparaissent [In the virtual, value is no longer the question but merely the putting into information, calculation, generalised computation where the effects of the real are disappearing]" (54). *The Matrix* partakes of (but also to a certain extent tries to detach itself from) this "veritable fascination with the virtual and all its technologies" (54). Needless to say that Baudrillard is of course very sceptical about this "posthuman" desire of a whole species to disappear into the virtual, as being a "choice": "celui de se cloner corps et biens dans un autre univers, de disparaître en tant qu'espèce humaine à proprement parler pour se perpétuer dans une espèce artificielle qui aurait des attributs beaucoup plus performants, beaucoup plus

[25] Other dystopian science fiction films like *The Matrix* and also *Enemy of the State* – and in a more "light-hearted" way *The Truman Show* and *Bicentennial Man* – have visited and thematised this "virtual fatality" by returning to representations of global surveillance and ideology. A "posthumanist" reading of these films would have to show how powerful contemporary (film-producing) institutions try to engage with but also shape our cultural imaginary in relation to the global terror perceived in "virtuality," i.e. in a post-realist and post-representational world in which what it means to be human can no longer be shown through the traditional humanist idea of subjectivity and on the mind-body-person dialectic. A critical rereading of the crisis of the humanist values these films display in their crisis should be instrumental in the discussion of the question of what the concept of humanity may eventually be replaced by, without giving in to either technological determinism, apocalyptic euphoria or simply dejection. When the boundaries of the human become fluid this may be the moment not only to ask (in by now familiar fashion): "what comes after the human?" but also "have we ever been human?"

opérationnels [the one to clone oneself heart and soul into a new universe, to disappear as human species properly speaking in order to perpetuate oneself in an artificial species with much more efficient, much more operational attributes]" (2000 : 54-55).

The Matrix, famously, cites Baudrillard in a scene towards the beginning when we see hacker Neo illegally selling "virtual experiences" (the future of "drug dealing") to a client. He stores his disks in a hollowed out copy of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* which opens at the first page of the last chapter (curiously shifted into the middle in this hollowed-out copy), "On Nihilism." So the film is therefore at once inspired by and commenting on ("virtualising") Baudrillard – the hollowing out of the book is highly symbolic. *The Matrix* describes "*le crime parfait*": the elimination of the real world, of the "original (fatal) illusion." In this sense the machines who (re)invented the world as illusion of an illusion, as a perfect copy, deprive humanity of their "evil" by "extermination": "exterminer signifie priver quelque chose de sa fin propre, le priver de son terme. C'est éliminer la dualité, l'antagonisme de la vie et de la mort, réduire tout à une sorte de principe unique – on pourrait dire 'une pensée unique' – du monde qui se traduirait dans toutes nos technologies – aujourd'hui, surtout nos technologies du virtuel [to exterminate means to deprive something of its proper end, to deprive it of its time limit. It means to eliminate the duality, the antagonism between life and death, to reduce everything to a kind of unique principle – one could say a 'unitary thinking' – of the world which would reveal itself in all our technologies – and today, first and foremost in our technologies of the virtual]" (2000: 77). The perfect crime destroys the "other" and any hope for a principle of "otherness." Neo could therefore be seen, in Baudrillardian terms, as a paroxyt-terrorist, who situates himself within this apparent "impossibility of exchange" of one world for another (1997b: 62) and thinks through this "undecidability between subject and object" (63): "il faut retrouver une sorte de pensée événement, qui parvienne à faire de l'incertitude un principe et de l'échange impossible une règle de jeu, sachant qu'elle n'est échangeable ni contre la vérité, ni contre la réalité [one has to recover a kind of thinking event which would manage to take uncertainty as its principle and would take the impossible exchange as its main rule, knowing that it cannot be exchanged either for truth or reality]" (101). Neo in his "exploding" of the Matrix from inside illustrates Baudrillard's impossible "nostalgia for (theoretical) terrorism" and tries to overcome the "terrorism of the system" and regain the possibility of finality, of death and hence of a subject. It is not enough to be a nihilist-terrorist because "to this active nihilism of radicality, the system [the Matrix] opposes its own, the nihilism of neutralization. The system is itself also nihilistic, in

the sense that it has the power to pour everything, including what denies it, into indifference… In this system, death itself shines by virtue of absence… Death no longer has a stage, neither phantasmatic nor political, on which to represent itself, to play itself out, either a ceremonial or a violent one. And this is the victory of the other nihilism, of the other terrorism, that of the system." In a sense Neo's final challenge to the Matrix at the end of part one, when he "promises" certain changes to the reality programme could also be interpreted as resonating with the final sentence of Baudrillard's "On Nihilism." Neo's future realm may be that of the object, of immortal appearances independent from any meaning which is "where seduction begins" (1994: 164).

On the other hand, *The Matrix* also necessarily supplements its own Baudrillardian reading. After all, Baudrillard is rather sceptical of the genre of SF as such. There are two aspects to this: the problem of science fiction's obsession with its own (anti-representational) disappearance, and its partaking in the "virtualisation" of the body:

> Le cinéma est fasciné par lui-même comme object perdu tout comme il (et nous) sommes fascinés par le réel comme référentiel en perdition. [Cinema is fascinated with itself as the lost object just like it (and we as well) are fascinated with the real as the referential in distress.] (1981: 75).

As a result, the imaginary (its fictional "as if") of the medium implodes within the real, producing a hyperreality in which the medium "se volatilise en tant que tel [vanishes as such]" (124) leading to "la catastrophe du sens [the catastrophe of meaning]" (125). For Baudrillard, SF has lost its own imaginary, its "order of productive simulacra," its specific utopia of technology and (space) colonisation and is now part of a movement in which fiction has overtaken reality. It thus finds itself in competition with theory:

> le bon vieil imaginaire de la science-fiction est mort, et… quelque chose d'autre est en train de surgir (et pas seulement dans le Romanesque, aussi bien dans la théorie). Un même destin de flottaison et d'indétermination met fin à la science fiction – mais aussi à la théorie, comme genres spécifiques. [the good old science fiction imaginary is dead and ... something else is emerging (and not only in fiction but also in theory). The same destiny of floating and indetermination puts an end to science fiction – but also to theory, as specific genres.] (1981: 177-178)

What does it mean therefore if SF (and *The Matrix* in particular) seizes upon theory (e.g. Baudrillard) as a source of inspiration? Is this still SF? Is it theory? Has SF returned the "letter" of speculative theory to itself? Is theory still able to comment upon SF?

A Baudrillardian stance with regard to the posthuman therefore suggests that the (posthuman) event has already happened and it is now merely a matter of imagining it. Hence the inevitable doubling of the event as described in *The Matrix*: the moment of recognition – that the event has taken place, and the moment of action – what to do with the event, or bringing about, bringing "home" (the truth of) the event. *The Matrix* for Baudrillard, however, is part of the symptom (as a trace of the underlying structure of the unthought real). The two moments I defined as double centre of the story are carefully prepared from the start. The film opens with a visualisation of the digital other, endless streams of numbers and symbols on computer screens, a constant flow, which is the master programme referred to as "the Matrix" and which determines the particular kind of virtual reality which we, like Neo, hold to be real. The ironic thing is that Neo, in the virtual reality he thinks to be real, is already constantly escaping through his computer into another virtual reality – and is thus doubly removed into the "virtual of the virtual" – and on top of that, as a hacker, sells this virtual virtual reality to others.

Neo is, from the start, interpellated by a virtual authority that interrupts this equilibrium: his computer screen is controlled by a mysterious and prophetic Other: "Wake up Neo, the Matrix has you." The interpellation is double from the start: on the one hand, it is the Matrix that "has" Neo, on the other, there are the cyberrebels who "want" Neo and who "tempt" him by his own desire to know: "what is the Matrix?" Morpheus thus becomes Neo's Other and subject-supposed-to-know. On the other hand, Neo becomes Morpheus's analysand; the usual game of transference and counter-transference begins. Morpheus as Neo's "master-analyst" also sees him as being the "One." The process of interpellation in the narrative is punctured with moments of "decision"; in the first part Neo is confronted with or subjected to three of these Althusserian moments of "free" choice – first by his boss who puts him in front of the choice between being punctual or unemployed; second by Morpheus who offers him freedom in the form of blind obedience to his instructions (an idea that is later presented as the reason for Cypher's defection and his desire to return into "self-incurred tutelage" within the Matrix) or being exposed to the totalitarian law of the agents who know about his double life as software writer and hacker; and third the choice given to Neo by Agent Smith to either cooperate with the State or the Law against terrorism or to be punished by State terrorism (i.e. the "Gestapo crap" to which Neo refers). A third level of reality is introduced at this stage. Neo is "bugged" (literally: the agents insert a "living" cyber-bug through his navel into his body to trace his movements) but is then made to believe the whole interrogation episode was a dream. Reality (that is VR) versus virtual reality (i.e. VVR) versus dream in VR, which dreams that R is

actually VR – while all of this is of course happening already in the fictional ("as if") of VR, namely the SF film itself. From the start, then, *The Matrix* is a play of repetition (compulsion), "choice" and recognition. It asks "what is a subject?" and, like all science fiction, imagines "who comes after the subject?" The "truth" Morpheus has to offer is that reality (the Matrix) and truth do not coincide. The whole problematic of cyberculture and virtual reality is here combined with "postmodern" forms of antirealism, truth relativism and Baudrillardian "nihilism."

It is worth remembering that Neo himself is not "new." He is the One because he is the repetition of the first Neo, who was "born inside the Matrix" but freed himself from it to such an extent that he could "change whatever he wanted." And it comes as little surprise in the sequels that the whole liberation and revolution plot is in fact nothing than a repetition or almost a ritual of a scenario that constitutes a (necessary) structural flaw in the Matrix, as the Architect explains. According to the rebels' "myth of origin," the first Neo started the "resistance" by freeing his first "disciples." Neo's arrival corresponds thus to the second coming of Christ, and the story of the film is at once the reiteration of the "life of Jesus" and the preparation for "judgment day." But according to the logic of the posthuman situation, Christ must be at once inside and outside the situation, i.e. he must escape both human and machine and incorporate them both (on several occasions Neo is identified with a machine: first when he starts his "downloading process" and his virtual kung-fu training; and later when Trinity asks him how he manages to "move like they [the agents] do"). Again, the sequels will eventually come up with the "inevitable" explanation that Neo himself is nothing but a programme.

Posthumanism is of course also the kind of thinking that displaces the humanist idea of a radical difference between human and machine. What if the "machinic" has always already "inhabited" the human? What if we have always been cyborgs? What if *technē* is what actually constitutes us as humans? Neo becomes master, both of humanity and machines, by transgressing two boundaries at the same time: he overcomes his *physis* and he overcomes the rules of the digit. He has to "free his mind" from reality (see Morpheus's explanation of Neo's bleeding in VR: "your mind makes it real"). Humanity enslaved by the Matrix-system, by reality, is in fact part of the enemy because at any moment the digital selves of enslaved humanity can be appropriated or "inhabited" by agents (who can slip into any human form). Morpheus reminds Neo of the frightening proximity between cyberrebels and agents. The human virus of the fight between good and evil has thus successfully been carried across into cyberspace: if you're not one of us you're one of them (namely, the agents).

The two opposites, good and evil, are mapped onto the two respective ideologies: that of the Matrix whose typical subject is Cypher (just a "digit") – ignorance is bliss (why didn't I take the blue i.e. "conservative" pill), and the enlightened "knowledge is all" of the Subject (all I am offering is the truth; the oracle's know thyself; the truth spoken by the child-zen master at the Oracle's home: there is no spoon; thus your mind is bent not the spoon) which depends on recognition and love (truth is like "knowing that one is in love" – the Oracle, here, seems to echo Badiou). They are also mapped onto the respective drugs – inducers of reality and truth – Cypher's cheap "spirit" that kills braincells; and the virtual training programmes (the VR games, the kung-fu scenes) to which Neo, like so many children of the postmodern posthuman age, seems to be "addicted." Getting hooked seems precisely the condition for human recognition in the first place: "We shouldn't deny our impulses because they are what makes us human," as Mouse, a minor programming-character who later dies for his unwelcome hedonist wisdom, explains. The Matrix, as Trinity tells Neo, cannot tell you who you are.

The paternal logic of *The Matrix* reinscribes the law of the father in the new "hybrid" form of reality within the cybercommunity. To that effect Neo has to symbolically kill his father figure (Morpheus) first. Ironically he performs this by saving him from physical death. Through saving his life he performs his symbolic death as leader. He becomes the One because he replaces the former father-figure who is now merely part of the subordinate multiplicity. What legitimates this deposition and enthronement is a sheer act of will and belief which leads Neo to "outmachine the machines." It is when Neo starts moving "like they do" that he becomes the One, i.e. mere belief, pure will, pure "idea" which is also pure experience (there is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path, as Morpheus explains). The virus of (absolute) idealism hence befalls the new cyberworld by appropriating the otherness of its other(s), giving an ironic appeal to agent Smith's radically (Nietzschean) posthuman speech:

> I'm going to be honest with you… I hate his place. This zoo. This prison. This reality, whatever you want to call it, I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink and every time I do, I fear that I've somehow been infected by it.[26]

[26] It is of course legitimate to ask why a programme should be afraid of "physical" infection, whether the reality Smith here refers to is "real" reality or the Matrix, and how would he know? It would also be interesting to know where Smith hopes to go once his job "here" is finished. Is there life after the Matrix for programmes like him? Do programmes dream of teleology, progress, identity and home?

Ultimately this is precisely what forces the return to anthropocentrism. Agent Smith is evil because he wants to be free, but free is what only a human can be.

This is also why human death is at once always a non-event (following Badiou) and the only event imaginable (against Badiou). As agent Smith says to Neo in what look to be Neo's final moments: "this is the sound of inevitability." It is by denying the event and hence accepting the non-eventuality of death (Trinity's "you can't be dead because I love you") that Neo rises again (by transformative self-affirmation, i.e. by claiming his new identity: "my name is Neo"). By incorporating his other, however, he becomes entirely other to himself; in a sense he becomes the Matrix, and, paradoxically, he "embodies" the Matrix and thus truly inhabits the digital self he always was. Would this still be recognizably human? Would it already be posthuman? Or merely inhuman?

Of course the medium of the cinema cannot but return to its own logic of representation. A purely digital vision, made explicit, would invalidate the very signifying practice of cinema. *The Matrix* thus returns to its beginning and in closing opens and reaffirms futurity and legitimates the genre of SF as a "just" (or realistic?) interpretation of reality. A phone call, for the first time, is made "to" the Matrix – which is now subject to address, i.e. the Matrix has somehow become "human," a subject-addressee. It can thus be interpellated by its new Master Subject, Neo. In an interesting reversal it is now the machine-world and VR that have a structure of truth ("I know you're out there and that you are afraid of change"). What returns is thus the human liberal subject projected onto and into the posthuman future as "system failure." The freedom of humanity lies in a "world without you" (without the machinic other); it is a "monstrous" world in which "anything is possible" but what it actually will be, is subject to the choice of the reconfirmed and purified virtuality of an "as if" ("I leave it to 'you'"). The price is, as usual, the becoming other during the incorporation of the other, in posthuman terms: so that there is no technological threat, Neo has to become more machinic than the machines, more agent-like than the Agents, etc. The posthuman truth thus seems to be the insight that there is no you.

The Matrix seems to work through Baudrillard's question:

> Comment peut-on penser qu'on puisse entrer dans une image vidéo pour en faire ce qu'on veut et qu'il y ait encore des faits, des événements, des valeurs qui puissant résister à cette immersion électronique? Tout passera dans ce véritable caisson d'isolation sensorielle que sont les écrans et les réseaux.
>
> [How can one think that it is possible to enter a video image and do with it whatever one wants and still have facts, events, values which can resist this

> electronic immersion ? Everything will be lost in this box of sensory isolation we call screens and networks.] (1997b: 60).

For Neo this seems the paroxysm *par excellence*: the only escape from the machinic virtual reality of the Matrix is by becoming more virtual than the screen and the net themselves. This may constitute a challenge to Baudrillard's "il n'y a pas d'au-delà de l'écran comme il y a un au-delà du miroir. Les dimensions du temps lui-même s'y confondent dans le temps réel [there is no beyond the screen like there is a beyond the looking-glass. The dimensions of time themselves dissolve into real time]" (1997a: 201). Everything that is being produced through the medium of the machine is itself a machine. The control over cyberspace is Neo's obsession: "commander à l'image, au texte, au corps, de l'intérieur en quelque sorte, de la matrice, en jouant avec le code ou les modalités génétiques [to rule over the image, the text, the body, from somehow inside the Matrix, by playing with the code or the genetic forms]" (201), but this phantasm is only the confirmation of the fact that "c'est la machine (virtuelle) qui vous parle, c'est elle qui vous pense [it is the (virtual) machine that speaks to you, it is the machine that thinks you]" (201) in a "désert du social, le désert du travail, le désert du corps que l'information engendra par sa concentration même [desert of the social, the desert of work, the desert of the body which information will bring about by its very concentration]" (1997a: 70).

Slavoj Žižek is equally sceptical about cyberspace and recommends a "conservative" attitude as long as cyberspace remains a "key symptom of our socioideological constellation":

> Does [cyberspace] not involve the promise of a false opening (the spiritual prospect of casting off our "ordinary" bodies, turning into a virtual entity which travels from one virtual space to another) as well as the foreclosure of the social power relations within which virtual communities operate? (1997: 130)

For Žižek fantasies of VR and cyberspace constitute a foreclosure of the body-real. For him, Neo's would probably be a cyber-psychosis fantasising about an "agent" who has taken over "my ego programme" (1997: 141-142). In terms of *The Matrix*'s denouement it may be worth quoting Žižek's account of a "virtual catastrophe" in full, and linking it to Neo's Baudrillardian "overreaching":

> The prospect of the accomplished digitalisation of all information… [cf. Neo's "instant access" to the Matrix]] promises the almost perfect materialization of the big Other: out there in the machine, "everything will be written," a complete symbolic redoubling of reality will take place. This

> prospect of a perfect symbolic accountancy also augurs a new type of catastrophe in which a sudden disturbance in the digital network (an extra effective virus, say) [cf. Neo's virus-like threat to "infect" the Matrix] erases the computerized "big Other," leaving the external "real reality" intact [cf. Neo's achievement of humanity's liberation and rebirth into reality]. (1997: 164).

Again, Žižek's scepticism should warn Neo against an idealism that the denegation of this "virtual" catastrophe may not lead to the desired result: "although, in 'real life', nothing whatsoever happens, and things seem to follow their course, the catastrophe is total and complete, since 'reality' is all of a sudden deprived of its symbolic support…" (1997: 164).

Posthuman Subject and Embodiment

What are the prospects for posthuman subjectivity? The fusion between man and machine that preoccupies posthumanist SF as well as theory, but also large sectors of science of course, poses obvious problems for the body and embodiment in general. In fact, shifting the focus from the old Cartesian body/mind duality towards the body as "process" or mere "project of embodiment" is central to the posthuman as such. Baudrillard speaks of the "denial of the body" and the fusion between intelligence and the machine:

> Ce ne sont pas seulement les facultés intellectuelles, c'est toute la libido refoulée et la dénégation du corps qui trouvent leur extension dans la machine informatique, devenue objet de désir sans désir… tandis que l'homme devient une excroissance inhumaine des facultés machiniques.
>
> [It is not only the intellectual abilities but the entire libido and the denial of the body which find their extension in the information machine that has become the object of desire without desire… while man becomes an inhuman excrescence of the machinic abilities.] (1999: 149)

"Man's" ultimate phantasm is to create a machine that surpasses him in every respect. On the other hand, he cannot envisage not remaining the master of his creation. This is nevertheless what is at stake in the posthuman scenario and the autonomy it provides to the machine-object: "l'homme est ainsi pris dans l'utopie d'un artefact supérieur à lui-même, et qu'il lui faut pourtant vaincre pour sauver la face [man is thus caught in the utopia of an artefact that is superior to him but which nevertheless must be overcome to save his face]" (1999: 146). The problem is that, in our preoccupation with the subject, we never imagine "l'aliénation respective de l'objet technique, son altération, son dérèglement par projection sur lui de phantasms trop

humains… C'est là une erreur de jugement: préserver la spécificité de l'homme suppose de préserver celle de la machine [the respective alienation of the technological object, its alteration, its disturbance through the projection of too human phantasms onto it… This is an error of judgment : to preserve the specificity of man presupposes preserving the specificity of the machine]" (1999: 149). This is the danger that is normally thematised in posthumanist descriptions and contemporary SF scenarios. A critical theoretical stance, however, has to be careful not to lose sight of the issue of subjectivity in the fashionable process of cyborgisation: "Délivrée du réel par le virtuel lui-même, la pensée peut se retrouver là où ça pense, là où nous sommes pensés. Car le sujet qui prétend penser sans être pensé en retour n'est qu'un suppôt organique préfigurant l'intellection inorganique de la machine [liberated from the real by the virtual itself, thought can find itself again where it thinks, where we are being thought. For the subject who pretends to think without being thought in turn is merely an organic henchman who prefigures the inorganic intellection of the machine]" (1999: 151). This pinpoints the ultimate paradox in many SF films, including *The Matrix*, namely that the "price" humans pay in projecting subjectivity onto the machine is that they themselves become interchangeable with that machine: a kind of suicidal anthropomorphism that turns humanity at once into an unachievable utopian desire while identifying it with the machinic other (cf. Bukatman, 1993: 16-17).

Posthumanism's dilemma is: what to do with the body? As David Le Breton explains in *L'Adieu au corps* (1999), the virtual reality of the posthuman seems to be the fulfilment of humanity's longstanding hatred for the body:

> Le corps n'est plus seulement, dans nos sociétés contemporaines, l'assignation à une identité intangible, l'incarnation irréductible du sujet, son être-au-monde mais une construction, une instance de branchement, un terminal, un objet transitoire et manipulable susceptible de maints appariements… Le corps est aujourd'hui un alter ego, un double, un autre soi-même mais disponible à toutes les modifications, preuve radicale et modulable de l'existence personnelle et affichage d'une identité provisoirement ou durablement choisie.
>
> [The body in our contemporary societies is no longer merely an assignation to an intangible identity, the irreducible incarnation of a subject, its being-in-the-world, but a construction, a connection point, a terminal, a transitional object that can be manipulated and paired with many adornments… The body today is an alter ego, a double, an other self but available to all kinds of modification as radical and malleable proof of personal existence and display of a provisionally or permanently selected identity.] (23-24)

In order to maintain a critical grasp on the posthumanist move from the body to mere processes of embodiment, which occur in contemporary late-capitalist techno-scientific culture, careful consideration has to be given to both fictional representations, which become virtually interchangeable with the contemporary cultural imaginary, and to theoretical discourses about processes of embodiment (cf. Hayles, 1999). The embodiment of subjectivities must not be dissociated from the material conditions of their emergence in our "post-biological" (and amorphous) age, where the body, according to Scott Bukatman, has already become cyborg: "to retain [the body's] presence in the world, resituated in technological space and refigured in technological terms. Whether this represents a continuation, a sacrifice, a transcendence, or a surrender of 'the subject' is not certain" (1993*:* 247). Fully embracing the posthuman transformation of the liberal subject through a rethinking of the relationship between thought and its specificities of embodiment, Hayles (1999: xiv) interrogates conceptions of virtualities in terms of their forgetting of the body and wants to move towards "embodied virtuality" as opposed to the phantasm of "bodiless exultations of cyberspace," an erasure of the body that would in fact, ironically, constitute a danger: namely that of posthumanism returning to a naïve form of idealist humanism. Hayles's argumentative trajectory is therefore quite similar to the logic encountered in *The Matrix*:

> First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman considers consciousness… as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that I is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot technology and human goals. (2-3)

The problem with most metaphysical VR theories, just as with truth relativism, Baudrillardian hyperreality etc., is their "invisible remainder," namely the body. What to do with materiality and physicality? Again, in *The Matrix*, it seems that there have to be two bodies from the beginning: the "residual self image as a mental projection of your digital self" as Morpheus explains, i.e. a mental projection, an imaginary body; and the degree zero, the sensual, physical body, i.e. that which dies when you pull the plug. The

curious logic at work in *The Matrix* involves the question of "translation" (how exactly does the *physis* "translate" into VR, i.e. the miracle of transubstantiation or digitalization achieved in the final scene? How is the physical body (not its image!) turned into "information"? And what about the miracle of origin (why, if you have been digitalised, does your body still die when you're shot in the Matrix/VR?). The posthuman real thus seems to lie in the split, or the unthinkable relation between the virtual and the physical body. The problem is not so much the material resistance rather than the fact that the *physis* of the body always seems to escapes in(to) the virtual. The body never presents itself as such and it is thus the object which is called upon to represent it (the telephone lines and the jacks).

Finally, to return to our initial question: why is it that at this precise moment in time, when technologically, politically and ethically, through the process of globalization, an idea of humanity seems at last realizable, this very humanity disappears into the posthuman, the inhuman and transhuman? And does this announce a disappearance, a return or a re-invention of the human?[27] This anxiety *and* desire of "becoming posthuman" (Hayles, 1999: 283) may signal a certain conception of the human as long as theory keeps re-membering the location of thought and agency. Or indeed, as long as the subject is being thought of as "emergent" (291) – i.e. we have always been posthuman *and* (therefore) never human enough – and as long theory does not forget a certain historical materialism (e.g. of the body and its processes of embodiment [193, 283-84]). Subjectivity as process and the result of an event, to return to Badiou, is the unsurpassable of theory, and of thinking in general. The subject of theory always refers to both events that were seen to occur in *The Matrix*: the event of recognition which starts a process of self-reflection and "hybridization" which, however, originates in the Other; and the event of "apotheosis" – the projected but uncompletable project of "purification," becoming universal, immortal etc. Between these two poles, theory and culture stubbornly continue their interminable work of re-writing.

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[27] Cf. Baudrillard's cry of despair: "c'est toujours la même chose. C'est au moment où l'on commence à intellectualiser un phénomène, qu'il disparaît dans les faits [it is always the same thing. The moment one starts intellectualising a phenomenon it disappears into facts]." (1997b: 39).

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"NEW THEORY?" THE POSTHUMANIST ACADEMY AND THE BEGUILEMENTS OF THE *MATRIX* TRILOGY

IVAN CALLUS

Abstract

This essay recognises that the *Matrix* trilogy has gone beyond the cultish and jacked itself into the mainstream of academic debate. What is it about *The Matrix* that makes it capable of attracting significant levels of attention within the theoretical humanities, and how does it single itself out from other works (be they filmic, novelistic, or essayistic) which address its same themes but fail to achieve comparable levels of canonicity? This essay will seek to answer these questions by critiquing the canonicity of the *Matrix* trilogy. It does so as a means towards raising deeper issues on *(a)* the current renegotiation of canonicity generally, and *(b)* the relative claim on the academic and popular imaginations of film and texts which address issues concerned with virtual realities and cultures, digital media, and the posthuman. In the process, a number of reflections are offered on the amenability of *The Matrix* to theoretical readings and on the trilogy's capacity to serve as a prop for what will be called "new theory."

> Why write about pop culture like *The Matrix*? Because that's where the people are. (Irwin, 2002: 1)

Introduction

There appears to be some consensus that "theory" – this discipline which has been described as a "miscellany" of a number of discourses (Culler, 1997: 4) – is undergoing a transformation. A number of commentators have constructed that transformation in terms of theory's perceived decline and weaknesses (see, for instance, Eagleton, 2003; and Patai & Corral, 2005). However it is equally appropriate to speak instead of a transformation that

reinvigoratingly adds yet other discourses to theory's miscellany. It is the latter scenario that will be the concern of this essay, which will consider whether it is pertinent to speak of a renewed theory – and, indeed, even "new theory" – coming into being as a result of increasing attention within the humanities to questions relating to technology, virtual realities and cultures, cyberspace, and digital media. Such "new theory" would reaffirm the importance of the works of figures like Derrida, Foucault, Bataille, Lacan, and Lyotard, but would above all seek to bring them into productive dialogue with the practices opened up by the diverse, exciting, and challenging technologies of our time. In what follows, the amenability or otherwise of the *Matrix* trilogy to theoretical discourses will be assessed, together with the three films' suitability as a basis for that kind of dialogue. What will therefore be addressed is the appropriateness of the trilogy as a prop to "new theory," particularly in relation to the increasing attention given to notions of the posthuman (see Hayles, 1999).

In order to address those issues I should like to proceed analogically, by asking the following teasing question. If academia were the Matrix, who might Neo be? The question is perhaps not so much a *non sequitur* as a *non incipit*. To liken academia to the Matrix is to look upon what is happening in the contemporary university as a deliberate, co-ordinated, and vast exercise in beguilement. This beguilement would be worked on all academics, administrators, and students who remain utterly unsuspecting of the desert of the real to which the academy's painstakingly constructed illusions of knowledge renders them oblivious. To entertain the thought of this beguilement is therefore to give time to the notion that what goes on in the contemporary university is at best a compelling distraction from the arid way of the world. What we think we know is an elaborate sting mounted by inscrutable machine-ations, and any knowledge the academy imparts works only to abet their efforts to draw the (re)searching gaze away from the desert of the real to the designs of the virtual.

The initial question then morphs into a critical doubt. Is there not a troubling ambiguity in this phrase, *the designs of the virtual*? Could it not be read as suggesting that the "virtual realities" within which the university now finds itself exert a fascination for the academic gaze, so that their designs, understood as architectures, call for and repay study, *but also* – and here is the crucial and indeed frightening ambiguity – that the very act of looking (re)searchingly and critically upon those realities' designs, understood as intentions, is what maintains the invisibility of what is in fact their overriding purpose: namely, to keep the desert of the real away from deepest knowledge? In other words, to approach the *posthuman* in the key of an academic focus on virtual, digital, replicant, and prosthetic technologies and

their correspondence with the passing of the human is to be blind to what is most starkly true about contemporary existence. Better, then, to approach the posthuman(ist) differently: in an effort to know ourselves, the world, and indeed our own knowledge better. But how can that be attempted, without some kind of "new theory?"

Analogies are almost always pleasing, and generally they are instructive. The one sketched out above, however, is perhaps facile, extreme, and alarmist. The worst perpetrations of the academy hardly compare with the control and the impositions of the Matrix. It appears clear that there is no need to worry ourselves that academia is the headiest version of "brains in vats" scenarios, and hence the other questions which might proceed from the analogy hardly require pondering. They could be mentioned anyway, however, simply for the sake of appreciating quite how impossibly neat the analogy would have to be to carry any force – but also because they will be reconsidered briefly towards the end of this essay, though in properly modulated form. Who or what might Morpheus, be: the one pressing others to see further, more deeply, and less delusively? Who or what might Agent Smith be: the one pressing for the unpenetrating gaze, and of whom there are in fact many ("the good thing about me is that there are so many of me") – and all opposing Neo's reaffirmation of the human(ist) in the posthuman(ist) Zeitgeist? Who or what might the Oracle be: the one who knows, who knows the importance of choice, and who points to the importance of "knowing thyself" as a step to knowing better? Who or what would the Architect be, who knows the system's previous states and is more than partly responsible for all of them, as well as for the current one? Who or what would Trinity be, the one who kisses lost causes back to life but who serenely gives up life itself at the moment of the deliverance of the human? Who or what would all the *dramatis machinae* of the Matrix be, these posthuman programmes calling themselves anthropoid names like the Merovingian and Train Man? Clearly, all these questions suggest the impossibility of the analogy, and the danger that it could lead to category mistakes of the most ludicrous kind: not least in the question concerning Neo, the One himself – in whom the academy cannot believe. It is hard to credit, after all, that one human, one human-ist, could deliver the race from its posthuman(ist) fate. That would be too trusting, too hopeful, too religious, and too naïve – and humanism, let alone posthumanism, has been proof against those temptations for a long time now.

And yet the academy appears to believe in at least one aspect of Neo, or at least of the world he inhabits. It believes that Neo, and indeed the *Matrix* trilogy in its entirety, is worthy of study. The current academy, which could in at least one sense unproblematically call itself posthumanist as it

moves towards consideration of an episteme that draws it away from the familiarities of the postmodern and the exhaustions of the humanist, is ready to invest in *The Matrix*, and has done so already to a striking degree. The academy of our time has given lots of time to reading the three films critically, and in terms of their exemplification of new curriculae which make the divides between high and low culture seem not only untenable but also uncomprehending of the fact that popular culture restages concerns drawn from the canons of supposedly high culture, which then feeds off it in turn, to produce – depending on one's outlook – either new energies for scholarship or, as more than one academic will have put it in the hearing of all of us, "crap." So the initial question could be rephrased to provide us with what might, after all, be a more proper *incipit*. Is scholarship's concern with the *Matrix* trilogy sustaining or wasteful?

In this essay, I should like to approach that question more narrowingly by asking what can be learnt about the theoretical humanities if one studies them studying the *Matrix* trilogy. In particular, I should like to read one particular text on *The Matrix*, by Elie During (2003): his introduction to the anthology *Matrix: Machine philosophique*. I have chosen that text because introductions to collections are where one must necessarily go to find reflection on reflections – and when what is being reflected upon is reaction to the *Matrix* trilogy, it might be possible to find there some discussion of "new theory." I should then like to discuss how it appears to reflect complex affinities between what is a major document in the posthumanist canon – the three films by the Wachowski brothers – and a current stage within the humanities as they come to terms with the fact that posthumanism – as episteme, discipline, and historical condition – is as unlikely to recede as the inevitability that Neo finally understands, accepts, and embraces at the end of the third film.

It is time, then, to indulge in some metaposthumanism – just as Morpheus did when presuming to know who the One was, and just as we must when presuming to know what studying the narratives about the One and his unreal worlds might really be about. As befits study of a trilogy, we shall proceed in three steps.

The Matrix *Trilogy and Its Place in the Posthumanist Canon*

We would be misguided to waste time in asserting the place of the *Matrix* trilogy in the posthumanist canon. Its place there is as unchallengeable as that of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), which helped to pioneer reflections on the human-machine interface, or the many narratives by Philip

K. Dick that were later filmically retold in movies like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Minority Report* (2002), which helped to fix the imminence and indeed the sometimes already achieved immanence of posthuman realities in the popular imagination. What might be challenged is that ours is in fact a time that might be called posthumanist: an objection that this essay will not seriously consider, and which it would rather deflect by assuming that the reader has already engaged with some of the many standard texts in the field that would deflect the objection. For what should rather be acknowledged is the fact that *The Matrix* has lured the attention of philosophers and cultural theorists in a way quite unprecedented for a "science-fiction" film. Slavoj Žižek, in an essay whose fame is itself an index of how quickly work on *The Matrix* has permeated the canons of theory, is, at best, ambivalent about that. He is uncomplimentary about "the pseudo-sophisticated intellectualist readings which project refined philosophical or psychoanalytic conceptualist distinctions into the film" – and thereupon proceeds to undertake, less "pseudo-intellectually," one hastens to add, a reading of *The Matrix* that regards it as allegorising a number of aspects of Lacanian theory, particularly concerning the nature of the Real (in Irwin, 2002: 240).

The Matrix, then, is a privileged "text" within the humanities, already read by academics if not to death then with deadly seriousness. Žižek explains why: "Isn't *The Matrix* one of those films that function as a kind of Rorschach test…, setting in motion the universalized process of recognition… [where] practically every orientation seems to recognize itself in it?" (240-41). William Irwin (2002), in his introduction to a collection of critical essays on the film, *The Matrix and Philosophy* – and hence, inevitably, in a justification of the academic industry around the trilogy – spells it out: "Name your philosophical *ism* and you can find it in *The Matrix*" (1). That seriousness around so many matricial *isms* might suggest the timeliness of a lighter tone in the discussion of the trilogy (cf. for example Herbrechter & Callus, 2004). Timelier still, however, is the expression of some dissidence in regard to the trilogy's centrality to philosophy and the idea of "new theory." Before considering that more closely, let me restate the critical stakes, which have to do with the impact of the the *Matrix* trilogy on the academic imagination.

That the trilogy has had a startling impact on the academic imagination is demonstrated by the publication in Paris in 2003 of the volume *Matrix: Machine philosophique*. Other collections, like the one edited by Karen Haber on *Exploring the Matrix: Visions of the Cyber Present* (2003), were meanwhile also confirming the trilogy's cachet within academic debate. *Matrix: Machine philosophique* signalled a further intriguing development. It proved that the trilogy had imposed itself even on an academic tradition not

normally given to extended commentary on Hollywood productions: that associated, loosely, with "French Theory." What is it about *The Matrix* that makes it capable of attracting that kind of attention from figures like Alain Badiou, who contributed an essay to the collection, and how does it single itself out from other works (be they filmic, novelistic, or essayistic) which address its same themes but fail to achieve comparable levels of canonicity? For, clearly, there can be no mistake about it: the *Matrix* trilogy has gone beyond the cultish and jacked itself into the mainstream of academic debate.

Interrogating this canonicity of the *Matrix* films has a certain urgency, especially as one of the most problematic aspects of the trilogy is an occasional tiresomeness. Interestingly, it can be shown that while the trilogy was achieving canonicity within university curricula, it was found to be underwhelming by some of those who might have been expected to make up its most loyal constituency: the legions of science fiction fans on whom the themes and scenarios in *The Matrix* might be expected to exert a special fascination. True: there is probably a lot of the apocryphal in the much-reported remark that audiences at the first screenings of *Matrix Revolutions* shouted out, in exasperation at Neo's protracted questioning and questing, "Oh, shut up and die already!" But my own experience of referring to the trilogy within my courses is interesting if a remark passed by one of my students is indicative: "*The Matrix* – it's *so* yesterday." There is a believable logic here: while academics turn their sights on *The Matrix*, and perhaps even because they have done so, the trilogy's natural fan base has already moved on. It would be interesting to consider what it has moved on to, but here, in this essay, I would rather like to question why the trilogy's tiresomeness appears to have been less problematic for academics, who are perhaps too thankful that *The Matrix* affords so many opportunities for "trendy" pedagogy and marketable research. There can be no doubt, indeed, that the trilogy suffers from a degree of portentousness, and that it is emblematic of what has been called the "fauxbrow." For all that, the *Matrix* trilogy continues to attract sustained academic attention – as is indeed indicated by the present anthology of essays. Should academics know better? Should they be less glib in their expression of the motivations behind their attention to *The Matrix* than the statement that provides this essay's epigraph? Or are they being all too canny and knowing in the attention levelled at the confrontations in the trilogy between human and machine, the real and the virtual: finding there a ready opportunity for seminars bound to attract student attention and allay suspicion that philosophy and theory – whether of the "new" or the dated varieties – are too remote and too esoteric for the "depthless" posthumanist culture they awkwardly inhabit?

In addressing these questions and critiquing the canonicity of the *Matrix* trilogy, I should like to make it clear that I do acknowledge the excellent work which has been done in interpreting the *Matrix* films. I do recognise that the trilogy has attracted rigorous critical commentary. My worry, however, is that commentary on *The Matrix* exemplifies not what a true and necessary renewal of theory could ideally be, but what "new theory" is most easily configurable as. It seems to me to be striking that the majority of commentaries on the trilogy by philosophers and theorists have limited themselves to the analogical and the allusive. We have had numerous readings which worthily and eruditely pursue the rich allusive intertext of the films, pointing out and expanding on the obvious and hidden references to diverse ideas within philosophy, literature, mythology, comparative religion, physics, mathematics, and much else. There is much to commend there. Cumulatively, the effort is instructive and a triumph of critical reading. It demonstrates, if nothing else, that the trilogy is perhaps the prime and foundational example of a kind of art we can expect to see more of in the age of the posthuman: a syncretic art which in depicting the virtual blends disparate discourses in a manner which contrives to pull off the popular rather than the precious, and which then *demands* the kind of critical attention that *The Matrix* has, in fact, attracted. Additionally, there can be no doubt that it is useful to discover such *trouvailles*, in theory's and philosophy's engagements with the films, as that pointed out by David Rabouin (in Badiou et al., 2003: 76), who in his analysis of the Taoist correspondences of *The Matrix* concludes that in a world where opposition loses all meaning virtual reality becomes reality itself; or that expressed unforgettably and pithily by Cynthia Freeland in the title, no less, of her essay, "Penetrating Keanu: New Holes, but the Same Old Shit" (in Irwin, 2002: 205-215). And it is also illuminating to come across essays which apply theory and philosophy in their reading of the trilogy, to show, for instance, that "the correct insight of *The Matrix*: in its juxtaposition of the two aspects of perversion: on the one hand, reduction of reality to a virtual domain regulated by arbitrary rules that can be suspended; on the other hand, the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utter instrumentalized passivity" (Žižek, in Irwin, 2002: 266). All of that is very impressive.

Yet all of that is not enough to suggest that the *Matrix* films are indispensable to "new theory." Such *trouvailles* and such readings do not seem to me to emerge, despite their tremendous and ingenious labour of exegesis, as obvious and compelling instigators of any "new" critical paradigm. True: in and as a result of all the readings to which it has been subjected, the *Matrix* trilogy has undoubtedly established itself as an

appealing and unignorable "text" for study within areas of the humanities – philosophy and theory – which had not previously been quick off the mark in realising that a new aesthetic (to put it grandly) was rapidly becoming worthy of critical attention: an aesthetic combining science fictional scenarios, virtuality, dystopianism, and philosophical reference, and where the "hero" of the film or text is ultimately nothing less than an "idea" and its treatment.[1] That, no doubt, is "new." It is unprecedented for a film like *The Matrix* to have occasioned the kind of commentary it has, and to have attracted as much interest from such high-profile commentators in the short time that it has. If an irreverent comparison might be made, this "instant canonicity" rather recalls the chants of "Santo Subito" ["Sainthood, Immediately"] which rose up from some sections of the crowds at the funeral of Pope John Paul II. Like the Vatican, the institutions of criticism, theory, and philosophy move slowly before canonising, and it is therefore as intriguing to witness them recuperating *The Matrix* as instantly as they have done as it is to witness the Vatican patiently explaining, in effect, that the process of canonisation has a *durée* to it that is appreciably slower than bullet-time. But while it might be "new" that films like those represented in the *Matrix* trilogy be discussed and critiqued so quickly and with such urgency within the academy, it is not at all clear that the trilogy has compelled anything "new," as such, within theory and philosophy themselves. Adding a text to the canon or the academy's curricula is not, of itself, radical. Nor does it mark the emergence of a new paradigm, a new critical idiom, a new way of doing theory or philosophy. Theory and philosophy thereby have a new text to read, and they have perhaps had it quicker and more urgently than normal – but that, perhaps, is all. No need to get excited about "new theory" then – at least not where *The Matrix* is concerned.

If that is the case – and just to make sure that the point comes across unambiguously – what is being implied here is that there can be no "new theory" compelled by a text that does not, in effect, work to alter critical and philosophical idiom itself. Merely extending the syllabus of theory and philosophy by one "text," however broadly and detailedly commented it is, is no substitute for that. Hence it would not be enough, if "new theory" is to "happen" in a manner that will come to instigate, *post modo*, awareness of "what will have been made," for an exciting text to generate excited critique (cf. Lyotard, 1992: 24). The "new" text would rather need to instigate "new" protocols of interpretation and argumentation for "new theory" to emerge.

[1] For commentary on Philip K. Dick's view that the true hero of a science-fiction novel is the idea and the conceits that drive it, see Elie During (in Alain Badiou et al., 2003: 11). During's introductory essay will be discussed in the second part of this essay.

Let me give a practical example, based on my own experience of discomfiture when engaging with *The Matrix*. I was initially tempted to participate in this collection with one of two approaches: either an essay which would have read the *Matrix* trilogy through applying the ideas found in Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book* (1989), and then proceeding to modulate that with consideration of what poststructuralist theory has said about the realm of the "*tele-*;" or, alternatively, an essay which would have demonstrated certain correspondences between the syncretic art of *The Matrix* and the "paragrammatic" art proposed by Julia Kristeva in the sixties (Kristeva, 1967). Doubtless that would have been interesting. But I grew convinced that the application of theory to novel contexts is not what would make theory "new," and I instead decided to take the somewhat more dissident and admittedly more peevish line of this essay. That came about because I came to feel that however worthily and commendably they have done so, all the essays which have pointed out analogies between *The Matrix* on the one hand and specific theoretical discourses or cultural practices on the other cannot quite open onto anything very "new." By the same token, those studies focusing on deliberate or unwitting allusions and patterns of intertextuality in *The Matrix* cannot engender any "new" critical paradigm. They are "merely" doing with *The Matrix* what critics of Pope's *The Dunciad* might do when updating and extending the insights of R. A. Brower's *Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion* (1959).

It might however be objected that it is doubtful whether interpretations of any text at all could, of themselves, lead to a quickening of critical ideas that might then be identified as coextensive with "new theory." I would contend, however, that the history of theory is, in fact, the result precisely of the reading of texts (most of them, in fact, quite "old") that were made intrinsic to new ways of theoretical interpretation, and in a manner which suggested, clearly as a result of *tour de force* critique, that there was a genius within the texts that was always already there, always already capable of energising the new within theory and within the humanities more broadly. This occurred, for instance, when Barthes (1975) turned some intense (post-) structuralist attention on Balzac's "Sarrasine," when Derrida (1976) trained his deconstructive sights on Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, and Saussure, when Gérard Genette (1972) sought to test his poetics of narrative time on Marcel Proust, or when Shelley's "The Triumph of Life" was made central to the thought of Derrida himself but also that of others, like Paul de Man (cf. Bloom et al., 1979). I do not think that anybody would want to claim that the *Matrix* trilogy has led to anything within criticism and theory of a comparable magnitude or momentousness. It might yet do so, of course, but that is another matter altogether.

But could it, indeed? I would like to answer that question by referring to the commentaries on *The Matrix* by Elie During, who, it seems to me, has come closer than most to indicating why the trilogy might indeed lead to something new within theory, something that is not already done routinely in the pages of a journal like *Science Fiction Studies*, in the classrooms where Film Studies, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies are taught, and in the seminars where philosophy and theory seek to acquaint themselves with discourses which their own may have downplayed. I would like to do that in the section below, and as a preamble to the third section of this essay, which questions those academic instincts that, while earnestly identifying the trilogy as a focus for rigorous critical debate, simultaneously overlook other arguably more layered evocations of "new theory" when this is understood in the key of the posthuman.

The Matrix *as a Machine of "New" Theory and Philosophy*

Elie During's introduction to *Matrix: machine philosophique* is clear-sighted about the difficulties of bringing the trilogy to philosophy. It admits that it is philosophers' wont to concern themselves with everything, and that this is all the likelier with a film "saturated" with philosophy or rather (an interesting qualification) with "philosophemes." But there is also something rather "adolescent" in this "philosophical blockbuster" that might well solicit the description "Matrix Overloaded" (in Badiou et al., 2003: 3). That would be in line with the reservations expressed by those commentators who felt that the philosophical argument in the first film was a mere decorative effect, a vast patchwork of allusions made up of metaphysical kitsch and affected profundity (4-5). On that score, the verdict that suggests itself is lukewarm at best: "*Matrix*: 11 sur 20, peut mieux faire. Y avait-il autre chose à dire? [*Matrix*: 11 out of 20, can do better. Was there anything else to say?]" (6).

Indeed, what else is there to say? During is aware of the incongruity that comes from the "inverted condescension" that is ready to extend philosophical scrutiny to a film that, he admits, is neither philosophical nor an example of philosophy turned into film, nor yet a film for philosophers. In an interesting effort at categorization, he describes *The Matrix* as rather "a theoretical film." That would be new indeed, perhaps an incarnation of "new theory" itself (6-7). *The Matrix*, for During, is a "machine à effets théoriques:" a generator of theoremes, so to speak, that are sure to interest philosophers – just like the stories produced by Roald Dahl's famous "automatic grammatizator," one might add, would be sure to interest narratologists (Dahl, 1997). For During, then, something did "happen" with

The Matrix, and this "intensity" bears a relation to the activity of theory in an age whose rhythms are no longer "pop" but "techno" (7-8). He suggests that this something cannot be properly apprehended by approaching the film through readings that apply, *ex cathedra*, a philosophical *savoir faire*, or by thinking that theoretical and philosophical interpretations of *The Matrix* should treat it as a pretext for redeploying notions and ideas that properly belong to other contexts. Rather, the key to reading the trilogy in new ways – perhaps even in the ways of "new theory," one could add – would not be mindfulness of any explicit or implicit philosophical content of the films, but, instead, the acceptance that *The Matrix* is not in fact a patchwork but is, itself, a *machine* (8).

We are, then, in an age of "technophilosophy," and *The Matrix* is one of its foundational texts, or devices, working to build – or, more precisely perhaps, encode – myriad small fictional machines configuring and configured by various narrative worlds and visual cues (8-9). This is virtual philosophy: it is modular and, as such, without end (9); it is also something of an ongoing philosophical experiment, which seems to serve as support and exemplification for various ideas within philosophy, and even, perhaps, as something of a building block for a new philosophy (9-10). But perhaps the circumstances are actually more radical, and lead one to accept that *The Matrix* takes to an extreme the view of Guy Lardreau that the goal of speculative science-fiction is not to redeploy philosophy but rather to substitute it (11; cf. Lardreau, 1998). It bears upon the same ultimate issues as those which drive philosophy: questions concerning the consistency and coherence of reality and of the human experience of reality, and questions concerning the relation between the world and that which is absolutely other to it (cf. also Irwin, 2002: 2). Perhaps, then, and as with most science fiction, *The Matrix* approaches the question of that otherness through resourcing fictional "other worlds," working, as Lardreau would have it, as "an intuitive rather than conceptual machine," and hence operating not as a subcategory within philosophy but as a discourse which intervenes in the métier of philosophy through other means (During, in Badiou et al., 2003: 11-12). In turn, During suggests, philosophy can help haul science fiction back from abandonment to the imaginary (12).

There remains the question, however, of the singularity of *The Matrix*, and its uniqueness in regard not only to other science-fiction narratives but also to philosophical, theoretical, and other discourses. During contends that this has to do with the trilogy's configuring of a machinery of simulation: one that reflects through various exterior signs a change within the nature of spirit and indeed of the human, such that the specificity of *The Matrix* lies in providing narrative charge to the tension between the topography of the

virtual on the one hand and the wisdom of the bodily on the other (14). Indeed, for During the achievement of the film lies in providing instances where Neo finds himself in between the constructions of the Matrix and those pertaining to reality, in particular in the scene where the Oracle points out as much to him in the first film:

> Ici le film réalise ce qu'aucune description littéraire ne saurait égaler. Il trouve la formule visuelle qui convient à un roman d'apprentissage qui est aussi, à sa manière, une "phénoménologie de l'ésprit." Tous ces aspects mis en scène par le film concourent à faire du monde construit par la fable un paradigme, un dispositif experimental susceptible de mettre à l'épreuve certaines intuitions touchant notre réalité, une fois admis que le virtuel ne peut être réellement distinct du réel. (15)
>
> [Here the film achieves what no literary description may be capable of. It finds the visual formula which corresponds to a *Bildungsroman*, which is at the same time in its own way a "phenomenology of mind." All those aspects performed in the film work together in order to turn the world the story constructs into a paradigm, an experimental device, which is capable of testing certain intuitions related to our reality, once one admits that the virtual cannot really be distinguished from the real. – My translation]

The problem with this, in my view, is not that During may or may not be right on the paradigmatic quality of what is pointed out here, but rather that there is no real instigation of any paradigm shift that might then become consonant with the identification of anything that might be termed "new theory." I do not get the sense, in commentaries on *The Matrix* or even in During's work on the film (which is otherwise extraordinarily canny in its appreciation of why the trilogy is important and worthy of critique) of any new paradigm or *épistème*. For that reason, During's presentation of the essays in *Matrix: machine philosophique* turns on a rationale that still, it seems to me and despite all protestations, does not quite get away from the order of being a redeployment of philosophical outlooks to new contexts – which does not quite measure up, *malgré les découpes*, to the inauguration of anything "new" within the humanities other than the welcoming of a further addition to the canon:

> À ceux qui soupçonnent cette lecture philosophique de *Matrix* de faire dire plus au film qu'il ne dit effectivement, et donc de l'instrumentaliser d'une autre manière en lui conférant une dignité qu'il n'a pas, il n'y a pas de meilleure réponse à donner que celle-ci: l'opération de branchement doit être évaluée à ce qu'elle produit, aux problèmes qu'elle permet de poser à neuf, en donnant aux choses une nouvelle découpe. L'intêret de la démarche adoptée par les textes qui suivent est qu'elle permet de resserrer des problèmes

> philosophiques trop larges, trop généraux, en les reconstruisant sur un terrain où ils peuvent être résolues en pratique, c'est-à-dire en action, dans le cadre d'une narration possible. (15)
>
> [To those who suspect this philosophical reading of *The Matrix* of making the film say more than it actually does, and thus of instrumentalising it somehow by atrributing a dignity to it which it does not have, there is no better response than the following: the act of jacking into [*The Matrix*] has to be judged by what it yields, by the problems it allows to be reformulated and the new approaches it permits. The aim behind the procedure adopted by the texts that follow is to refocus philosophical problems that are too large, too general, by shifting them onto a new terrain where they can be resolved in practice, that is in action, within the frame of a possible narration. – My translation]

In fairness, During does provide some indication of the novelty of *The Matrix*. He points out that the operations of the Matrix are not some kind of solipsistic fantasy, but a collective and interactive hypersimulation (15). In addition, the trilogy succeeds in transposing the problems of philosophical scepticism from the epistemological and metaphysical ground they customarily inhabit to moral and political contexts where they acquire a new urgency (16). And, very interestingly, During makes reference to the curious invocation of the telephonic throughout the film, and its relevance to a rethinking of the representation of space in a virtual universe (16). All of that is undoubtedly very cutting-edge; all of that is undoubtedly very "new" and very exemplary for the posthumanist academy. The novelty of that, and the innovative readings it leads to, is not in dispute. Nor, indeed, should one cast any shadow on During's or the other contributors' very incisive remarks on the trilogy's capacity to put to work, with *machinic* neatness and cohesiveness, some very heterogeneous intertextual, interdiscursive, and intermediatic cultural codes (17). But impressive as that is, it is not quite the platform on which to build "new theory," nor the model for one. *The Matrix* could doubtless be a primary text for any "new theory" that might come into being, but it has not, as yet, quite installed itself as a limit-text for the "older" theories, and I cannot say that I have seen it prompting, in the critiques I have read about it, any critical discourse that brings to mind the imminence of a new paradigm. In other words – and this shall bring us to the subject of the next section, which involves speculation on the "states of theory" (see Carroll, 1999) – it is hard to get the impression that *The Matrix*, even in this French book of "French theory," is at the centre of anything very similar to that "primal scene" which occurred for theory in Baltimore when Derrida rose to read the essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (in Macksey & Donato, 1970). *The Matrix* impresses its

novelty on many areas – film language, media studies, cultural studies, and many more – but, for the present, it is not quite an agent of significant transformation in the posthumanist academy.

Why Commentary on The Matrix *Fails "New Theory"*

The canonicity of the *Matrix* trilogy in the academy of today raises deeper issues on *(a)* the current renegotiation of canonicity generally *(b)* the relative claim on the academic and popular imaginations now of texts on the one hand and the non-print media (particularly the impact of the digital arts) on the other, and *(c)* the manner in which posthumanism (the episteme which, after postmodernism, appears to have installed itself as the "structure of feeling" of our time) is being constructed within the academy. "New theory" would need to address those issues. Indeed if *The Matrix* is interesting for new theory it would be precisely because it brings those issues to the fore in ways which, as in the most rewarding criticism and theory, allow the text to read back the theory.

And yet what would "new theory" be, and what is it precisely that *The Matrix* would read back? There are two issues to keep in mind here. Firstly, it is arguable that ours is a period of comparative stasis in the humanities that has in part to do with the definitive elapsing of a time that brought with it extraordinarily rich and influential writings by a generation of thinkers represented by Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, Bataille, Lacan, Blanchot, de Man, Deleuze, Lyotard, and Derrida. They all provide hard acts to follow, and any proponent of any "new theory" that comes along in their wake risks eliciting some underwhelmed responses. For, as theory and philosophy often proceed on the basis of the identification of "great thinkers" – as indicated by an academic publishing industry sold on "critical introductions" to the work of such figures – it is both bemusing and disorienting to look around and wonder whether there remains anybody who deserves to be "critically introduced." This leads to a certain degree of wistfulness within the humanities. It is that wistfulness that makes keener the hope that new directions for theory might emerge from the work of a radical "new" thinker – or, better still, thinkers – who might yet reinstitute the sense of dynamism and "happening" that grew around, for instance, the *Tel Quel* group in Paris in the sixties. It is also with that in mind that the start of this essay asked, fancifully and disingenuously, who Neo would be in the analogical game that casts academia as the Matrix. Academia still works very much after all on the model of discipleship of the Great Thinker and adherence to the Great Idea, however sophisticated the multiple denials of

that truism might be. Of course, this essay is not a site for nominations of the next important bandwagon. In addition, the analogy provided by *The Matrix* goes only so far. Academia's Neo, assuming he exists at all, is unlikely to be somebody currently languishing in an academic limbo that is the higher education equivalent of microserfdom to Metacortex (cf. Coupland, 1995). Yet it is undeniable – to extend the analogy a little bit further – that many might wish to play Morpheus and announce his Oneship to a posthumanist age.

For the moment that point may remain suspended there, in order for the second issue to be brought up. And this second point concerns, precisely, posthumanism, as the episteme which arguably succeeds postmodernism and yields a "new" discourse for our time. Posthumanism, whether this is approached in the key of "post-humanism" or in the key of "post-human-ism," understands that the challenges of the digital, the virtual, the nanotechnological, and the biotechnological mean that the agendas for the humanities have to be rethought in step with the reappraisal of the integrality and the specificity of the human, and of the constantly enhanced encroachments of the prosthetic. The realisation that many of the scenarios of science fiction are no longer futurological or speculative but, in some very immediate ways, expressions of what is in fact a new realism, means that the uncertainties produced by the prospects for a reengineering of the human find, in a work like *The Matrix*, sublimations of some deep fears and concerns. If *The Matrix* acquires canonicity, therefore, it is because it has provided to the contemporary imagination and to critical discourse a vivid and dramatic fictive rendition of those fears and concerns: one that recasts and reworks established traditions and blends them with depictions of crises that appear very exclusively of our time and of our worst futures. In that sense, *The Matrix* is an important posthumanist film and a leading point of reference in the posthumanist canon. The problem, however, is that the *Matrix* trilogy appears to have attracted primarily commentaries that, in mainly making precisely that point, or explicating its allusive texture, or positioning it as a space where theory and philosophy might apply themselves additionally rather than otherwise, fail to envision it as a pretext for a reconceptualisation of theoretical discourse. In other words, and to put it crudely, the *Matrix* trilogy cannot, for Theory, be Neo.

This suggests to me *not* that we must perhaps wait a little longer for a radical reading of *The Matrix* to come along, but that the expectations that "new theory" should "renew" the humanities by making them more cognisant of new technologies and new media and new art, as well as articulate and perceptive about them, are inadequate and misguided. What is needed in any "new theory" is surely not the ability to read *The Matrix* impressively and

unignorably, but rather to place the trilogy within a broader and deeper perspective on the posthuman condition. Surely it is the latter that needs more urgent theorising, not *The Matrix* itself; and once that happens, the trilogy will in any case quickly become much more amenable to more exhilarating theorisation than it has been open to so far. My impression, however, is that the beguilements of the *Matrix* trilogy are such that they induce analysis of the trilogy to proceed under a very narrowing spell of interpretation, rather than through a gaze turned more searchingly and penetratingly on the immenser realities and virtualities from which they spring. It is almost as if we were reading Pope's *The Dunciad* (to take up that comparison again) with a view to learning more about Grub Street, rather than with an eye on the broader culture – literary and otherwise – of the "long eighteenth century."

Of course it could easily be objected that films like *The Matrix* are what make it easier to speak of posthumanism in the first place, and that to be impatient for a mode of critique that, in time, will surely emerge is to be churlish with the Wachowskis and everybody who has written, memorably and insightfully, about the trilogy. That is a fair point. But I am also aware that when I wrote, in another context and together with Stefan Herbrechter, about the prospects of what a special issue of the journal *Angelaki* called "new cultural theory," it was with the hope of seeing a form of posthumanist discourse and of analyses of "texts" like *The Matrix* that might yet proceed, amidst the tendency of "modern and postmodern cultural thinkers [to] gravitate toward aesthetic, experiential, moral, practical, and political questions concerning the essence, interpretation, actuality, rhythm, and riddle of technology," in a manner that would render Theory itself prosthetic (Callus & Herbrechter, 2004: 238; Armitage, 1999: 2). Such "new theory" would be prosthetic in the best sense: as a support to "the thinking of the technological and the networked, lest this proceed too lamely, too limpingly, too unarticulatedly in the wake of that which it sets out to keep up with" (Callus & Herbrechter, 2004: 240). At the time, we identified six modes in which theory's thinking of the "posthumanism" might proceed, and also dropped a mention there of *The Matrix* as an important contributor to a "fourth" and "cultish" posthumanism. In that approach to posthumanism, narratives like *The Matrix* would receive "the respect reserved for more conventional masterpieces," and the result might well be called "new theory:"

> George Steiner's fears about the pre- or counter-literateness of the young might thereby appear justified, especially in view of the indications emanating from a film like *The Matrix* (1999) being approached as reverentially as *Macbeth*, or the installing of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) as posthumanism's answer to the niche afforded in a humanist culture to William

> Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A very "new" form of cultural studies might emerge from this, hence the scope for a label like "new cultural theory" that designates a discipline and a practice that may already be with us. (242)[2]

There can scarcely be much doubt that this has come about, though it is questionable whether either of the labels in question, "new theory" or "new cultural theory," has stuck. What is certain is that it remains true that "science fiction is the genre of choice in posthumanist criticism of narrative," and that this is "the corollary to the perception that science and technology might be the last 'metanarrative' in the 'meatworld,' and self-evidently the only viable one in the digital 'mentalverse'" (243).

I now have increased doubts, however, about the sufficiency of approaching films like the *Matrix* in this key. I rather suspect that the fifth form of posthumanism identified at the time becomes all the more urgent. In question, then, would be "the discovery within the posthuman of an amenability to appropriation by 'philosophemes' and 'theoremes'" (243). This would not proceed, as indicated already, by merely seeing within *The Matrix* an opportunity for a deployment of philosophy and theory to novel contexts. Critiques which make *The Matrix* a prop for theory cannot introduce any newness to theory; rather the critique of *The Matrix* must be one which perceives the trilogy as a text which, if read rigorously and without condescension, can prompt understanding of the blindness and the insight in the philosophical and theoretical themselves. In other words, that approach accepts the viability of the fourth option but understands also that *The Matrix* can, itself, "read" the philosophical and the theoretical. An example of an analysis undertaking that could, for instance, be provided in a hypothetical reading which focused closely on the language of Neo as a prime site where the tensions between (post-)subjectivity, consciousness, alterity, and the virtual become articulated. Neither theory nor philosophy have really considered such articulations at any length, not least for the very good reason that they have never had to. But Neo, as one of the first (and very philosophically minded) posthuman (anti-)(super)heroes, would thereby provide an important cue and focus for any "new theory" trying to come to terms with the fact that what his language represents is an extreme but highly instructive example of the pressures which the increasing immediacy of the posthuman and the virtual bring upon consciousness, doubt, and self-perception – and hence upon the rethinking of such discourses as psychology, phenomenology, and, indeed, theory and philosophy too. If that were to occur, then the sixth kind of posthumanism, the kind "already contained

[2] The reference to Steiner turns on his view that ours is increasingly an age for the numerate, not the lettered (see Steiner, 1989: 115).

within theory" (244), and which speaks, for instance, about the *tele-* the inhuman, post-subjectivity, various technologies of memory and the archiviological, and diverse constructions of "endism," could all the more easily serve as an unignorable component of the kind of "new theory" that would be able to bring to a film like *The Matrix* not merely the procedures of expository and analogical discussion, but also those very critical idioms of theory that, already posthuman *avant les nombres* of *The Matrix*, could then be deployed in their most powerfully articulated form in a reading of the trilogy.[3] Without that, discussion about *The Matrix* would remain limited to the repetition of what there is already too much of, and it does not need consideration of the contrasts between Neo, the One, and the self-replicating Agent Smith to appreciate that the singularity of the philosophical is preferable to the banality of the repeated.

Conclusion

It must therefore be concluded that the beguilements of *The Matrix* lie in making it easy for discourses within the humanities to suppose that no "new theory" is needed to take account of the trilogy's challenge for critical discourse and, more broadly, for posthumanism. We should know better than that, of course, as the Oracle would surely tell us (hopefully without having to point above any door or towards any portal or anthropoid programme as she enjoins us to know ourselves). The posthumanist academy, the one which must internalise and reproduce any "new theory," cannot afford the beguilements of the familiar if it is to meet the challenge of the virtual. To be beguiled, in this context and indeed in the analogy which served as our *(non) incipit*, is to be content to read *The Matrix* as if the posthuman and the designs of the virtual had not already "happened." Knowing oneself to be posthumanly in the virtual and accepting one's position there changes the apprehensibility of the real, and theory surely must – like Neo – *choose* to renew itself if it is to have "purpose" in the new and, indeed, *as* the new. In that renewal, "new" idioms, "new" agendas, "new" terminologies, "new" conceptualities, "new" theoremes, and "new" philosophemes would be needed. If they were to occur, then theory would not need to worry about who the analogue of Neo – who would succour it and the posthumanist academy in the times of the virtual – would be. It, itself, would be Neo.

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[3] It is because of this criterion that even the theory brought to bear upon *The Matrix* by figures like Žižek and Badiou could not be, in the sense understood here, "new theory."

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